THE BEST IN ROMANTIC FICTION

JAN

NEW LOVE MAGAZINE

15¢

Angel IN SEQUINS

by VAL NEWELL

MR. Christmas

by BILL SEVERN

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When there's BLOOD ON THE MOON
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He met his match—and his fate—in her arms!
RADIO

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BILL STOPPED THE WILD BOAR'S CHARGE AND THEN...

WILD TURKEY HUNTING IN A SOUTHERN NATIONAL FOREST CAN HARDLY BE CLASSED AS A DANGEROUS SPORT, BUT WHEN A WOUNDED WILD BOAR INTRUDES...

BANG! BANG!
NAILED HIM, EH? WHAT THE...!
I FIGURED HE'D HEAD FOR THE CLEARING. SO, I TOOK A SHORT-CUT AND...
GOT HERE JUST IN TIME TO SAVE MY LIFE!
WHEN WE BORROWED JEB'S CAR, WE SHOULDA TAKEN HIS TRAILER, TOO
WHY THAT'S JEB SCOTT'S CAR! THEN YOU MUST BE HIS HOUSE GUEST!
THAT'S ME, ALL RIGHT!

WELL, JUNE, IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU TWO COULDN'T WAIT TO MEET FORMALLY. I WAS GOING TO BRING BILL OVER THIS EVENING
UNCLE JEB, YOU'RE A PEACH
SHE'S LOVELY
LATER
BLADES. YOU BET! TRY THIS THIN GILLETTE
WHERE HAS THIS BLADE BEEN ALL MY LIFE! THAT'S THE SLICKEST SHAVE I'VE HAD IN YEARS!
THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY POPULAR DOWN HERE. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

HE'S A FINE YOUNG MAN. EXCELLENT APPEARANCE AND VERY INTELLIGENT
I KNEW YOU'D LIKE HIM, COLONEL. I'VE APPROACHED HIM REGARDING A JUNIOR PARTNERSHIP

YOU ENJOY SWELL, EASY SHAVES... QUICK AND CLEAN... WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY ARE THE KEENEST BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD AND FAR OUTLAST ALL OTHERS. MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, THIN GILLETTES CANNOT SCRAPE OR IRRITATE YOUR FACE. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW-10 BLADE PACKAGE
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The Best in Romantic Fiction

NEW LOVE MAGAZINE

15c

PEGGY GRAVES
Editor

ALL STORIES NEW

VOL. 23 JANUARY, 1949 NO. 2

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DEAR READER:

If you were Jennifer Avery would you have fallen in love with Kent Stafford . . . particularly if you were engaged to be married to his half-brother? That's exactly what happened to Jennifer less than twenty-four hours after she had promised Link Stafford she would marry him in June.

And that very afternoon, at a luncheon party, she had listened to her friends discuss the notorious Kent Stafford in terms that were far from complimentary. He had signed his adopted father's name to a check for five thousand dollars . . . He'd had to leave town . . There had been girl trouble . . . A hit-and-run accident . . . And now that old Mr. Stafford was dying he had come back seeking forgiveness—and a cut in on the will . . .

Jennifer had left the party, her ears ringing and her curiosity aroused. She was a newcomer to the fashionable suburban town, and had never met Kent . . .

Not until that evening, when Link brought him to her house. And she wondered how within the brief span of one day she could have given her hand to one brother and her heart to another. Tall and wide-shouldered he was, with a face that was too ruggedly planed, and a mouth too firm and hard-lipped. But it was his eyes that held her spell-bound . . . his cool gray eyes that had a mocking gleam and seemed to look straight into her soul.

"Isn't she just what you would have ordered for me?" Link asked.

"It looks like it." The gray eyes never wavered. "But I'm not sure you're what I would have ordered for her."

And so we give you the opening of Helen Ahern's novelette, MARRY ME TONIGHT. It has glamor and intrigue and tender love scenes. A deeply moving story by one of your favorite Romance writers.

* * *

The February issue also includes CLOUDS OF STARDUST, Vicki Hille's fascinating novelette, as well as stories by Ruth Scarlett, Grace Mack, Alice Warner and Millie Breece . . . for your winter reading pleasure. February NEW LOVE out December 31st. Until then,

Sincerely yours,

Peggy Graves

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Angel in Sequins

Lana's halo was slightly at an angle on the night she wore the daring black dress—and met the man who wanted to put her back in heaven.

CHAPTER ONE

Angel's Last Fling

LANA WAS EIGHTEEN, blond, and beautiful. Angelic. With a halo, she thought, staring hard at her reflection in the dark-blue mirror back of the bar.

The halo tonight was slightly aslant for several reasons. The biggest reason was that she was wearing a brand new black gown—with sequins—which she was very sure her fiancé would not like. It was slightly wicked looking. It did not in the least resemble the pastel chiffon thing he had thought she was going to wear.

He was late. Half an hour late, to pin it right down to the very second. Perhaps he was piqued because she had left a message that he was to meet her at the bar of the Studio Club instead of picking

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By
VAL
NEWELL

Framed in the doorway, stood Shane Trevor with a woman in his arms.

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her up at her grandmother's as had been arranged.

She might as well be killed for a sheep as a lamb. *A black sheep—with sequins,* she thought, as she drew a hankie out of her evening bag in search of a cigarette. Her fiancé did not approve of cigarettes. He thought it spoiled the angelic look.

She found one. She took out a compact and a lipstick, searching for the elusive match folder in the bottom of the bag.

Like magic, a lighter appeared before her and a strong, bronzed, interesting-looking hand snapped the flame.

A wicked thrill went right down Lana's spine. This, she thought, was a pickup. At a bar. Her fiancé, whose name was Ramón Miguel Vincente Carlos Alvarado y Cardoza, would die. Why did she have to be so madly in love with a stuffed shirt?

She looked at the hand and the little flame for a long moment. She was not a strong character. If the man turned out to be interesting, she was as likely as not to babble her head off till Ramón showed up.

She closed her eyes to shut out the temptation. She thought about Ramón who was tall and suave, when he wasn't being romantic and emotional. Ramón was a Nicaraguan. A facinating, thrilling, man whom she had known for years, and whom she loved so much it was almost unendurable sometimes.

But he had the Latin viewpoint about women. Among the many things Ramón thought women simply did not do, one was going into a cocktail lounge alone; and another was picking up strange men.

She opened her eyes again, slowly. With her mind made up. But it wouldn't hurt just to accept a light, would it? The Studio Club was supposed to be an exclusive place. The ultra in dates was to go to the Studio Club. There was no sense in being snobbishly rude.

"Thanks," Lana said in a very soft, remote little voice. Then, without looking at the man, she dropped her lipstick, her compact, and her handkerchief, one by one, back into her bag and snapped it shut.

She reached for the cocktail the bartender had set before her a moment ago.

"You know," a deep, pleasant voice said, "there's a law around here. It's stuffy, of course. But enforceable. No liquor to minors."

And the interesting-looking hand lifted her cocktail just as her fingers were ready to close over it.

Lana sat there. Something hot and dangerous was welling up within her. She recognized it as being a Latin sort of excitability that she had caught through living the last ten years in Nicaragua. Her mother had married José Martinez the facinating vice-consul in San Francisco, and José's temperment was infectious.

She quelled it ruthlessly to lift cool, amber eyes.

The stranger had red hair. No, not red; brown. Shot through with a trace of copper, so that you wanted to keep looking at it to decide which it was. *Brown,* she decided definitely. And then his head moved a fraction of an inch, and it was plainly red.

And brilliant blue eyes that were not quite laughing at her.

LANA STIFLED A SIGH, her momentary sense of sophistication shattered completely. She said, "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing at all."

"I mean, I bought the most *svelte* gown they had in the shop, and I did my hair differently, and everything. What tipped you off?"

He looked at her hair, which was the palest gold, and smooth as silk. He looked at her evening gown, that was slender and suave with its sequined bodice and utterly simple lines. And then he looked at

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Lana's mouth, which was softly curved and very vulnerable.

He said, "You are beautiful."

"Thank you," Lana said, staring back curiously into the bright blue eyes.

"But young."

She sighed. "And there is a law."

"Yes."

"Do you enforce it?"

"Strictly speaking, no. Are you alone?"

She grinned a little. It was pure gamin, a relic of pigtail days on horseback. "Not at the moment."

"Waiting for someone?"

"I am waiting," she said nicely, "for Ramón Miguel Vincente Carlos Alvarado y Cardoza, who is supposed to have picked me up here half an hour ago."

He looked dazed. "Vice-president of Chile?"

"He's a Nicaraguan. He owns bananas, quantities of them. But he prefers horses." Then as his blank look continued, she relented. "I call him Ramón."

He said nothing, but continued to look at her.

Lana suggested, "Now may I have my illegal cocktail?"

He handed it to her. Their fingers brushed, and he looked down. He did not need twenty-twenty vision to see the dazzling brilliance of the three-carat diamond she wore.

"Ramón?" he asked.

She nodded. "He'll be here at any moment."

His eyes were fiercely blue. "Just the same, no more liquor for you, junior Jezebel."

Ten years of José welled up within her. "Who says so?"

He turned. "Jerry."

"Yes, sir," said the bartender, coming instantly.

He said something very rapidly, and not in English. Lana's tawny eyes turned to yellow flame, but she said nothing. With a furious restraint, she snubbed out her cigarette and sipped the cocktail.

"Shane . . ." Another man was there. A waiter. "Crocker's here again. With that blonde."

"Throw him out," said the man who was not red-headed.

"What about the blonde?"

"Her, too. But smoothly."

"Check."

Lana said with soft anger, "So that's it. You're Mr. Studio Club."

"Shane Trevor to you, half pint. *Mr.* Trevor. You'd better call your boy friend. If he's half an hour late, he may not show."

"He always shows." Her pride was rankling. "And the next time, remember that I've lived south of the Border for ten years before you start slinging Spanish at a bartender."

He slipped off the stool, six feet high and wide-shouldered and red-headed. Definitely. His smile was gentle.

"Have you, baby? Then don't try to order another drink. And go phone the boy friend."

He walked off and left her sitting there.

LANA FINISHED her cocktail. Slowly and seethingly. She had been brought up wrong. She realized it now. Leaving the States when she was eight, to live in a land of hot-tempered, transparent, cards-on-the-table men, had not trained her to cope with one smiling, red-headed American.

Resigned, she went to phone Ramón, who had promised to pick her up at her grandmother's before she had decided to wait for him here. But he was not at the hotel. And a call to her grandmother's house revealed that both of her grandparents had gone to an impromptu party at a neighbor's.

"Oh, yes, Miss Lana," Dinah said in her rich Alabama voice, "Mr. Alvarado called. He said to tell you he would be

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late. He's gone to see a horse."

"Did you tell him where I am?"

"No, Miss Lana, he hung up too quick. But when he comes I will."

So she called the hotel again. Her mother answered.

"Oh, Lana, darling, why do you do things like this? If you'd stayed at Father's as you were supposed to—"

"Don't scold, Cita, it's perfectly all right. He'll be here soon . . ."

"Darling, I simply won't have you hanging around some low dive! I'll send José for you—"

"The Studio Club is not a low dive. It's terrifically elegant, truly it is! All the best people come here . . ."

But her arguments were useless. Cita —she had come by the knickname because José, fascinated at finding himself married to a beautiful woman with an eight-year-old daughter, had started calling her *mamancita*—had turned the phone over to her husband.

José was expressive. He was voluble. He was concerned. No child of his, he said, was going to hang around a night club alone. If Ramón was not there in fifteen minutes, he was coming after her.

"All right," Lana capitulated. "Look, José, let's put it this way. If Ramón doesn't come in fifteen minutes, I'll phone you. But if he does, I shan't bother, because we'll be busy and he hates to wait. Is that all right?"

That was, said a mollified José, all right.

She sat at the bar and had another cigarette, mentally daring Shane Trevor to throw her out. Jerry, the bartender, offered her ginger ale, disguised in a cocktail glass, but she spurned it.

"How long do you stay open?"

"Two o'clock, miss."

"Where does Shane Trevor work?"

He nodded toward the foyer. "He has an office upstairs."

"Really? Well—after all I suppose the Studio Club is a business in a way."

"In a big way," Jerry grinned. "Honest, I'd bargain to die ten years sooner, for a good-sized piece of the Studio Club."

A slender, dark-haired man walked through the door. Alone. Lana turned eagerly, but it was not Ramón. She felt neglected and worried, and all the fun had gone out of the evening.

She might as well call José to come and get her. Disconsolately she went out to the discreetly concealed telephone booth in the foyer. But the booth was occupied, and another man was waiting to use it.

Well, she thought, there was always the office. If Shane Trevor is so anxious to have me taken care of, he'll let me use his telephone.

She did not ask anyone where the office might be. Jerry had said it was upstairs, hadn't he? So she went up, without giving any of his employees a chance to let him know she was coming.

And that was how she happened in on something that could really be called a scene.

She walked into an office that was beautifully furnished in a restrained sort of way, but empty. The carpet, pale gray and very thick, muffled her footsteps.

THE DOOR TO ANOTHER office stood open. And beyond it, framed in the doorway like a picture, stood Shane Trevor.

With a woman in his arms.

She was dark as night. She was crying. She was clinging to him. And she was so lovely in a mature, husky-voiced way that Lana realized why he had so easily spotted her as being under voting age.

But as she stood there, watching wide-eyed with no intention whatever of eavesdropping, she realized that the woman was not, after all, quite in his arms. She was standing very close and she was clinging to his lapels and crying.

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But she was not in his arms.

"Shane, I can't go on like this," she was saying huskily, miserably. "I just can't!"

"You had no business coming here." It was low and furious.

"I was wrong, darling—so terribly wrong! He's horrible—and I love you so much—"

"Oh, sure," he said, bitterly. "I know how you love me. You wanted respectability, didn't you? Well, you've got it, Estelle. You've got it . . ."

Now she was in his arms. And he was kissing her.

Lana knew she should not be watching. It was something terrible and personal—like staring at death or birth of grief or passion. You did not stand there watching a thing like that. And yet when she wanted to move, not a muscle would stir.

A door behind her closed, very softly. She turned. A man stood there, a little man with glittering eyes and rage on his face. He did not see her at all but was staring at the picture framed by the doorway.

The little man walked past her, shoving her aside as he would a piece of furniture, without realizing she was not just a piece of furniture in his way.

"Estelle," he said, in the tightest, hardest voice she ever heard.

Shane lifted his head. There was a bright smudge of lipstick across his mouth. There was the stillest sort of moment, and then things happened quite suddenly.

He gave Estelle a shove that sent her stumbling out of Lana's vision. The little man leaped at him with a blow of pure rage. And people were there, appearing abruptly out of nowhere to grasp the little man firmly, holding him there as he raged and swore.

Shane said scornfully, "Get this pip-squeak out of here before he gets hurt. And find Al. If he'd been on the job, none of these people would have got in. Now clear out, the whole lot of you!"

Lana shrank against the wall, wide-eyed lest they throw her out, too. But they did not come out that way. She heard a door close, and then there was a moment of silence. It lengthened. She heard a little metallic click and wondered what it was. Then another click. A cigarette lighter, going on and then off.

Lana drew a slow breath and stood in the doorway.

He was leaning against one corner of the desk, staring moodily at the floor, smoking. At the soft whisper of her skirt, he lifted his eyes slowly. They wandered over her as if she were some strange female from Zululand.

"Where the hell," he asked rudely, "did *you* come from?"

She swallowed. "I was here before."

He stared at her. His eyes were fiercely blue. His hair was fire red, until he moved, then it instantly was brown again. She snapped open her evening bag, hating herself. Hating him, too. Taking her handkerchief, she walked over to him and wiped off Estelle's lipstick. All of it.

He stood quite still, waiting.

She said, "You might at least have hit him back."

"Why?"

"All right. Be smugly superior. Just because you're bigger than he is."

"He had a right to hit me. That was his wife."

SHE STOOD THERE. It was not until he reached down to pick up her handkerchief that she realized it had slipped from her numb fingers.

He looked at it curiously. Black, it was, to match her gown. A three-inch square of silk set in a ten-inch square of sheer lace. The scent of it drifted between them.

She said huskily, "Now I've heard everything."

"Sure." It was bitter. "Why don't

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you go home where you belong? I don't like the idea of children hanging around my club."

"Don't worry. I will."

He picked up the telephone and dialed. "Carl? Did Bennett and his wife go out yet? Fine. If they ever get past your door again, it's your job. Just bear that in mind!"

A man came in. A very large man with a lot of muscles. His name, it seemed, was Al. And from the decisive words that Shane ripped at him, Lana learned that he was supposed to stay in the outer office, keeping people like Estelle and Bennett away from Shane. Or else what the devil did he think he was being paid for?

"What about this dame?" Al asked, casting a jaundiced eye at Lana.

"She's okay. Get out. And close the door."

Lana said numbly, "Maybe it seems trivial, now. But all I came up here for was to use your phone. The booth downstairs was busy. I wanted to tell José to come and get me."

"José? I thought it was Ramón Carlos, *et cetera.*"

"José," she said, "happens to be my step-father." And she added nastily, "He's outraged at my hanging around a dive alone."

"No cracks. What's the boy friend's name again? The one he really uses."

"Ramón Alvardo."

"Has he a reservation?" At her nod, he picked up the phone to dial again.

"Harry. When Ramón Alvarado comes in, call me."

Lana asked, "What do I do?"

"You sit down, wait for the boy friend, and keep your mouth shut."

"Here?"

"Here." He tossed a magazine at her. "Between articles you can ponder what makes women so preverse that they all ought to be shot at sunrise."

CHAPTER TWO

Never Trust a Redhead

WITHOUT WAITING to see what she did about it, he seated himself behind the desk and drew a sheaf of papers toward him.

Lana stared down at the magazine. It was a very good one, thick, glossy, heavy. She looked from it to Shane Trevor, who had forgotten she was alive. Then her gaze wandered slowly about the room.

It was large. The panelled walls were soft green, the carpeting was deeper green. There was a fireplace at one side of the room with a huge sofa before it. But it was Shane's desk, large and gleaming that dominated the room.

She sat on the sofa and looked at the magazine. José by now would have assumed that she was with Ramón. That was going to take some explaining tomorrow, when Ramón and José exchanged viewpoints. She ought to make that telephone call right now, and get out of here. She looked at Shane, her lips parting to tell him so.

He had run his fingers half way through his hair, his forehead in his palm, his elbow on the desk, and he was staring blindly at the papers without having any idea what they were. Under his tan there was a queer, white, sick look.

Lana sat very still and said nothing.

I love Ramón, too, she thought, frightened. *That's exactly the way I'd feel if anything happened between Ramón and me. Darling, impetuous, intolerant Ramón, with his fantastic ideals . . .*

She could not remember when she had first started loving him. Because ever since José had stopped being vice-consul in San Francisco and had taken them to live in Nicaragua, there had been Ramón, the son of a close friend of José's. Ramón, being insufferable toward the little *Yanqui* girl who did not realize how properly

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brought up girls should behave. Ramón, scolding her and then apologizing profusely when she wept. Ramón, a big brother, an impossible censor, wildly outraged when she went back to San Francisco to attend a private girls' school.

A slim dark man who, when she came home from school, had fallen quite abruptly in love with her one moonlight night at a party . . .

They had come on this trip to the States so that her grandparents, Cita's mother and father, could meet him before Lana married him. It had been worth it, for they approved whole-heartedly of the match. In a few days now, she and Ramón and José and Cita would be going back home, where Lana would marry Ramón and try terribly hard to be exactly the sort of girl he wanted.

She should not, she thought penitently, have bought this gown. He would not like it, and what Ramón wanted was really the most important thing in the world, even if she did have moments of rebellion. And if he didn't want her to smoke, she wouldn't. And she would behave decorously and try to remember how a wife in Nicaragua was supposed to act, even though it was hard because she was an American girl.

It was a beautiful dream, one she had for quite a while. There always seemed to be quite a gap between the dream-Lana and the real-Lana. The angel who was exactly what Ramón wanted, and the wayward imp with her unruly independence.

RAMÓN'S HAND was on her shoulder. His voice was soft. "Hey, Jezebel . . ."

She turned her cheek drowsily toward the hand before she realized that it had not been Ramón's voice after all, nor had the words been anything he would ever say to her.

Her wide, fringed amber eyes opened sleepily, to behold an utter stranger . . . And then she remembered. The Studio Club. The redhead who was not quite a redhead. Shane Trevor.

She sat up, confused, wondering how she had happened to fall asleep.

"Time to go home," Shane said. "Where do you live?"

"Hotel Williston."

"Oh?" It slid up a couple notches. The Williston was the best hotel in town.

She said, "My name is Lana Gordon Martinez. Gordon was my father's name, Martinez my adopted name. So would you please stop calling me Jezebel?"

He grinned a little. "Okay, Lana."

"Miss Martinez, to you, *Mr.* Trevor, if you don't mind!"

He rose, then bowed. "Señorita Martinez. I'll take you home."

The night club seemed very large and silent as they went down stairs. Deserted, save for a few lingering employees.

"Lock up, Al. I'm taking Nicaragua home."

"Okay, Shane . . ."

His car was big, but not too big. Good, without being ostentatious. Lana bounced on the cushions tentatively, forgetting to be sophisticated.

"Nice," she said.

He eyed her. "You seem frisky enough, for such a sleepyhead. How about a swim?"

She blinked. "A swim?"

"Sure. A nice, warm pool, underwater lights, a pot of hot coffee. I live in the country, you know."

"How far," she asked cautiously, "in the country?"

"Just a few miles."

She shouldn't. If she had thought about Ramón even once, she wouldn't have. But at the moment a swim sounded heavenly, and there was something adventurous about the idea of a swim at three in the morning with a dubious character like Shane Trevor. *In*, she thought deliciously, *a pool with under-*

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water lights. It sounded almost as wicked as a black gown with sequins.

So she went.

THE POOL WAS ENORMOUS. It shimmered greenly with its mysterious lighting, and all around it was a tiled terrace, with a long, deep loggia along one side. Lana, wearing a borrowed yellow two-piece suit from the random selection in the bathhouse, thought it was all quite enchanting.

She sat at one end of the pool, dabbling her toes, loving the cool night air on her skin.

"Come on in," Shane said, hauling himself up, dripping wet, to sit near her.

"I shall. I'm just savoring it, first."

He watched her. "Even in a bathing cap," he said slowly, "you are quite fetching."

"Am I?"

"But there seems to be a slightly devilish tilt to your left eyebrow. Did you ever notice it?"

"No."

He reached one long arm over to a glass and iron table. "Cigarette?"

"I mustn't."

"Why?"

"Ramón."

"Oh . . ." There was a small silence. She thought, startled, *Whatever am I doing in a place like this with a man like this? I'd better get out of here.*

"Race you to the other end," Shane said abruptly and shoved her into the water. He won, easily. It was a very long pool and Lana had not swum that far for quite a while. She was glad, when she arrived, for his proffered hand that drew her out.

She sat on the tiles, breathless. "That was a dirty trick."

"I'm full of them. Never trust a redhead."

"Are you a redhead?"

"Haven't you decided yet?"

The luminous green pool cast an eerie light over his features. She could see his smile. In the half light his hair seemed very black, dripping water, and the hardness of his body was glistening.

She sat there staring at him. And after a while her heart began to thud senselessly, and the cool, fresh night air became stifling. But she could not move. She did not want to move, even though she knew what was going to happen.

She saw his smile fade away. There was a waiting, electric tenseness between them. She wondered wildly just what had started it. Nothing they had said, surely. Nothing they had done . . .

She was in his arms, knowing that she herself had made the first move, and yet realizing that in the same split instant Shane's hands had reached out to draw her there. It was a crazy, ruthless, unthinking thing, bigger than they were, twisting them heedlessly to its will.

"Shane . . ." she whispered. "Shane!"

In the gloom his mouth was a straight dark line. And his eyes . . . Shane's bright blue eyes were not blue at all now, but narrowed, darkling gleams in the fantastic light from the pool. They stared down into hers as if he were hypnotized.

"Shane . . ." It was a lost breath of sound, as her shaken fingers reached up to touch his cheeks. "Don't look at me like that . . ."

AND THEN she was drawing his face nearer, and he was kissing her. Strongly. With a sheer blind passion that shook her very soul and sent her heart spinning from one side to the other.

She had asked for it. And she was glad.

Because no one had ever kissed her like this before, nor ever would. It was not a casual kiss nor even a nice one, but it was terribly, urgently real. With a stark simplicity that threw out all the polite little rules and conventions.

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He let her go and got to his feet. Lana closed her eyes, not seeing the pool or him or anything, though she knew he was standing there, staring down at her.

And then he walked away . . .

She slipped numbly into the water and swam off. Somewhere, anywhere. Swimming furiously to break the shameless languor that had held her spellbound. Wanting to get a million miles away where she could hate herself thoroughly without feeling this mad desire to be in his arms again.

At the other end of the pool she climbed the ladder and pulled on a terry robe that lay there, drawing the belt tightly, angrily.

She walked over to the low glass table and casually picked up the package of cigarettes.

Shane was there taking them from her.

"Ramón," he said, through his teeth.

"Let me alone, Shane." Her voice was treacherously thick.

"You're in love with him. You're engaged to him. This is rotten, Lana."

"Don't I know it?" she said bitterly.

"I shouldn't have brought you here. I didn't think. Estelle—"

He didn't have to say it. She remembered that lost, sick look, and the way he had said, *He had a right to hit me.*

Shane said something soft and furious under his breath. "Lana, I don't know how this happened."

"I do," she whispered. "It was my fault. A silly adolescent girl toying with glamor. Playing with danger. Only . . . I didn't know how really dangerous you could be . . ."

"Do you think you're not?" he asked in low rage. "With that angelic look of yours, only half hiding the dynamite? You're trouble, Lana—bad trouble. I'm going to take you home."

"Shane . . ."

But he turned blindly and walked away from her.

CHAPTER THREE

"I Hate Him!"

THERE HAD TO BE a moment of reckoning. She knew that. She stayed in bed as long as she dared the next morning, trying to think of something to tell her parents. To tell her fiancé.

Ramón—she thought desolately. She despised herself and despised Shane Trevor, too. Ramón, who was impetuous and romantic, and who loved her very much, even if he did criticize her dreadfully. How could she ever face him and tell him what had happened?

A kiss, that was all. You could reduce it to just those two words. A kiss—from a man she had not known before last night. A big red-headed guy who owned a night club. The Studio Club.

Any man might resent a thing like that, but somehow you could explain it. You could say, "You didn't show up, darling and I blew my top. I went off with this man and we had a swim and he kissed me. That was all." And if the man knew Lana at all, he would know she wasn't lying.

Any man, that is, but Ramón.

Ramón had a lot of inflexible rules about women. Another man's kissing his fiancée was virtually a challenge to his honor. Besides, proper fiancées did not do things like that. It was disgraceful. Unthinkable.

If she wanted to keep Ramón, she would have to gloss it over a bit. She loathed glossing things. When she was little, she had tried keeping minor iniquities from Cita and José, but in the end her innate honesty had charged through like a wild colt broken loose. She hated lies, hated living with them.

Did she want Ramón that much?

Dressing with a dreadful slowness to avoid facing the people she loved, Lana knew that she did love Ramón that much.

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Maybe he was stuffy and narrow about a few things. Maybe she was going to have trouble all her life being the sort of girl he wanted. But she was going to try desperately. Because the whimsy and romance and enchantment that made up the rest of Ramón more than offset his faults.

He was pacing the sitting room of the hotel suite when she came out. Cita and José, finishing a late breakfast by the window, were trying to soothe him between sips of coffee and bites of muffin.

José, who was sometimes very calm, said, "Certainly, Ramón, you are exaggerating. Nothing dreadful could have happened to Lana. She is in her room, sleeping peacefully."

And Cita, who was not quite so calm, murmured, "Anyway, we'll hear where she was when she comes out."

"But I tell you I didn't go near her grandfather's place! This man told me about the white stallion, and it was the only chance I had to go, so I left a message with that maid, Dinah. She never told me—" He stopped abruptly. "Lana!"

SHE STOOD IN THE doorway, slender and pale in a pink linen frock that made her look much more angelic than she ever would be. Pale hair brushed her shoulders in soft tendrils, and tawny eyes looked wide and apprehensive.

She expected him to start scolding her instantly, but he did not. He came to her and took both her hands in his.

"Lana," he said, softly. "My dearest . . ." And he tucked a kiss into her palm and turned her fingers tightly over it, so the twinkling splendor of their engagement ring could stand guard.

"I'm sorry," Ramón said gently. "I shouldn't have done it. But there was this white stallion. I've been so worried about you, Lana!"

"Oh, Ramón!" She slipped her arms around his neck and cried, much more bitterly than the occasion warranted. He patted her shoulder and whispered things and kissed the place on her temple where the golden tendrils began.

"Ramón, I love you," she sobbed. "I truly do, and I'll never, never again do a single thing you don't want me to. Never, Ramón . . ."

She had promised that several times before. She knew it and so did he. But he tipped her face up and kissed her gently and led her over to a window seat that looked out over the little lake in the park.

"Now," he said, wiping her tears with his handkerchief, "I shall tell you about the white stallion."

Ramón loved horses. And white stallions were extremely rare. This one he had heard of entirely by accident. It was for sale but was being shipped out of the state that very night by its owner. He hadn't had time to do more than phone a message to her grandfather's house for her; there hadn't been even time to insist that he speak to Lana herself. So somehow he had missed the vital fact that Lana was not there.

"I didn't know until I came here this morning that anything was wrong. I was ready to leap out the window. I was frantic." Ramón spoke extravagantly sometimes.

"Lana," he said, and she knew it was coming. The sixty-four dollar question. "Where were you, beloved? What were you doing? Why didn't you come home instantly?"

Lana looked at him. Then she turned her head to look at José and Cita, who were finishing their breakfast, eating quite slowly so it wouldn't be obvious that they were chaperoning her. Not that anyone did not know it, but Cita was half of a mind that this chaperonage stuff was overdone, anyway. So she pretended, instead of admitting it.

Lana's gaze fell to her hands, lying so

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limp and still beneath his. She whispered, "Oh, Ramón . . ."

"Surely," he said gently, "it can't be so bad as that. Come, now, it is quite simple, I'm sure. You said you would phone José in fifteen minutes if I did not arrive. Why didn't you phone him?"

"You are not going to like this, Ramón."

"No?" His gentleness was slightly tempered, she realized, with wariness, now.

"Well . . ." Lana swallowed. "I met a man."

A pause. "A man, Lana?"

"Yes." And then at his stillness, she ad-libbed wildly. "Oh, he was a perfectly respectable man, Ramón. Truly he was! I mean, his family are quite prominent, and everything. His name is—is Reynolds St. Alban—" *Now where in heaven's sake*, she thought dully, *did I get that one*? It sounded utterly melodramatic. But respectable. Oh, certainly respectable!

"Yes." He said it rather flatly. "Then what?"

"Oh, Ramón . . ." Tears were in her eyes again. "I'll never be the kind of girl you want me to be!"

"Let me be the judge of that, *querida*. The rest of it, please?"

She thought about telling him of the swimming episode, then hastily discarded it as being out of the question. No girl in her right mind would go to a man's country place for a swim. At three in the morning.

Had she been in her right mind?

She whispered, "Darling, there wasn't anything else. Not really. We—we stayed there at the Studio Club and danced and had supper and—they have a marvellous floor show. Ramón, it was wonderful—"

"Yes. And what time did you come in?"

"I don't know. Quite late. We stayed almost until they closed."

She paused, feeling desperate. The Studio Club had closed at two. Supposing Cita and José had lain awake to hear her come in? Supposing one of them had already told Ramón that it had been nearly five when she tiptoed to her room?

Cita murmured, "You certainly must have, darling. I was never so worried. I lay awake for hours—I think it must have been nearly one before I dropped off. And José was still sitting up in bed, pretending to read a book."

José said, "It is nonsense. I was never worried for a moment. The book was most interesting, but I—I fell asleep over it."

Ramón looked at Lana for a long time. Then he smoothed back his hair carefully and rose. He walked halfway across the room. Lana held her breath, waiting. Then he turned abruptly . . . and the storm broke.

THIS WAS, he said, the most maddening thing she had ever done. Would she never learn? Must she always behave like a—a wild little donkey? Picking up a strange man—in a night club, of all places! Spending the entire evening with him!

"Yes, Ramón," Lana whispered humbly, but he did not hear her.

When it was all said, and he had apologized, he held her close and gave her a forgiving kiss that lasted much longer than a really on-her-toes chaperon should have permitted.

Then he took José to see the white stallion, whose owner, tempted by the fantastic offer Ramón had submitted, had not shipped him out of the state after all.

Cita said reflectively, "Well, cupcake, he swallowed it. But you'd better not let *that* happen again. Or—" She shrugged expressively, "no Ramón!"

Lana wanted to tell her. All the lies were swelling up in her like poison, and she wanted to get rid of them. Cita had always been helpful and understanding.

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But when her lips were parted to actually say it, something hot and cold and terrible washed through her, just as it had when Shane had kissed her. And she knew that she could not tell Cita.

BY WAY of apology for his neglect last night and his scolding this morning, Ramón took them all dancing that night. To the Studio Club.

Lana did not wear her new black gown. She never, never again would do anything in defiance of Ramón. Because he was sweet and forgiving, even if he did scold her mercilessly; ever since she could remember, he had scolded her and forgiven her for things. But he loved her and she loved him, and they would be very happy all their lives.

The black gown she thrust into its store box and dropped into the nearest street-corner trash box, so no curious hotel employee might think it had been thrown away by accident and return it to her. Vehemently she wished she could drop a lot of memories into that trash box, too. But maybe it was a good thing she could not.

This way, she had learned a lesson. Maybe it had been a terrible lesson to have to learn, but she was grateful for it, because it had, after all, turned out harmlessly. With any man but Shane Trevor —or maybe even with Shane, if Estelle hadn't happened along that very night to remind him where his heart really belonged—her impulsiveness might have led her to disaster.

She would never see him again, never speak to him again, never think of him again.

But she had to go to the Studio Club that night. There was no way she could get out of it, without revealing her passionate distaste. So she protested too little, lest she protest too much.

She wore a lovely yellow chiffon gown, utterly simple and naïve, which Ramón adored. She looked very young and vulnerable.

And Shane Trevor walked past her as if he had never seen her before in his life.

She did her best. She smiled a good deal and was as gay as she could possibly be, under the circumstances. But Cita, watching her with a maternal thoughtfulness, was suddenly stricken with a violent headache and had to be taken home. Cita never had headaches. José was so upset he insisted that Lana return also in case Cita should take a turn for the worse.

José was rather emotional, too.

Cita's headache improved marvellously, once she was home. She had a lovely time, with José holding her hand and fussing around. Lana, who could not face going to bed to lie there sleepless, curled up on the window seat in the yellow gown, and looked unenthusiastically at the afternoon paper.

There was nothing much in it. Some politics, a train wreck, and the picture of a murdered man. She was about to turn the sheet over when the eyes of the picture seemed to pounce at hers. She stared at the picture blankly, and then felt a big, empty stillness growing within her.

It was the little man. Smiling, yes, in the photograph, but the eyes were the same. And he had that same dapper little mustache.

Estelle's husband!

SHE LOOKED helplessly at the picture, not wanting to care. People get murdered—taxi drivers and doctors and even famous personages. But you don't know them, and you merely wonder a little and forget it. But Estelle's husband!

Lana closed her eyes, not reading the article. She thought, *Now he can have her.* And a queer frightened shiver went through her, as if the thought were some-

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how macabre. The sort of thing one never said aloud and was ashamed of even thinking.

The paper slipped from her lap to the floor. Lana rose and went over to the radio. Turning it on, she dialed until she found a newscast. The announcer had finished the international news, and was doing the nationals. A congressional investigation, the train wreck.

". . . And here at home, authorities are trying to solve the murder of George Allen Bennett, millionaire oilman, whose body was found by servants early this morning in the library of his Hillcrest mansion. Mrs. Bennett, who collapsed on being told of her husband's death and was taken to Providence Hospital, said she heard the fatal shot at approximately three-fifteen in the morning, but assumed it to be a backfire from a passing car. Included in routine questioning was Shane Trevor, proprietor of the Studio Club, fashionable Park Boulevard night spot. Trevor said both Mr. and Mrs. Bennett had been at the club last night, but had left around eleven."

Lana turned off the radio. She thought, But why should the police question Shane about it? What have they found out, that they should question him?

Just that the Bennetts had gone to the Studio Club. That was all it could be. No one knew of Estelle's being in his private office . . . did they? Or that the little man had been so furious? Or that Shane had had them both put out?

Did they?

Night club men and beautiful women and wealthy oilmen. She wanted no part of it. She was just a girl who had come up from Nicaragua with her fiancé and her parents—a girl who was going to be married in two or three months.

LANA WENT TO HER ROOM and undressed and got into bed. Lying there in the darkness, she tried not to think. She willed herself to be still and sleep. It did not concern her. He had really been an ugly little man. And his wife had been an unpleasant person, too, double-crossing one man after another. And Shane, who had admitted he deserved to be hit . . .

Why had they questioned Shane?

Even though she lay there willing herself not to do it, one hand was reaching for the telephone book by the bed, while the other groped for the light switch. She found the number, and dialed the bedside phone.

"This is Lana Martinez calling Shane Trevor. Tell him it's urgent."

"I'll see if he's around, Miss Martinez," the man said. *Al,* she thought. But maybe it was someone else. She waited.

"He's not in the office right now, Miss Martinez. Would you like to leave your number?"

"No . . ." If the phone should ring, José would answer it and wonder about a strange man calling her.

She waited fifteen minutes, then called again. Shane was still out. Ten minutes, then another call. Sorry, Miss Martinez. Thirty minutes. Sorry . . .

She knew then. Shane did not want to talk to her.

She could be cold and proud, too. She lay there, hating him. For eighteen minutes. Then she pushed back the covers and rose.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shane Trevor's Blonde

A GOLD-DUST silk frock, naïve enough to disarm even Shane Trevor. Little tiptoe-high pumps. And because she wanted to feel cool and poised and maybe even the least bit arrogant, she slipped on Cita's mink coat, that had been put in her closet because there was more room.

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Praying earnestly that José and Cita would assume that she was asleep, she snapped off the light and stole out.

Before a big apartment house, four blocks from the Studio Club, Lana dismissed her cab and walked over. It was nearly closing time. She did not enter the night club but waited in the shadows behind the building, near his car.

"Shane . . ."

She saw him stop dead. And for a moment had a desolate vision of his walking away and leaving her there. Then he turned slowly. Reluctantly.

Lana said miserably, "I had to see you."

He said nothing. As he stared down at her, his face was in the shadows, hiding what he thought.

"Shane," she whispered.

He walked over and opened the car door. "Get in."

Driving down a side street, he took her toward her hotel. In the flicker of passing street lamps she saw his face, grim, tired, immobile.

"Let's have it, Lana."

"I—I heard it on the radio. Just a few minutes ago. I didn't know before, Shane, please believe me."

"So what?"

"Do you—do you need an alibi?"

He turned his head then to look at her. And she knew instantly that the mink coat was a mistake. It was the wrong touch, making her look like an empty-headed debutante who had gone hunting for thrills and now was scared to death of the results.

He said one word, bitingly. "No."

"Shane . . ."

"You're a priceless little fool, Lana. Stupid. Childish. Keep out of this, or you'll blow up your nice little life. Don't you realize what you're doing? Or did you tell Ramón the truth?"

She was pale. "I lied. You can hate me for that, too."

"I don't hate you for anything. I don't hate you at all. But for heaven's sake, Lana, watch you step!"

"I tried to phone you—"

"But you couldn't take a hint?" he lashed. "How do I know they haven't tapped my phone? How do I know there's not a tail on me, right now? I run a night club. Or as they might put it in Nicaragua, baby, I stink."

"Shane, don't be like this!"

"I'm telling you facts. Stop making like a little heroine. You've got a life to live, too. I'll get out of this."

"Then," she whispered, "it *is* serious."

"Look, baby. For five years I've been so much in love with Estelle I didn't know what I was doing. But she wouldn't marry me unless I gave up the Studio Club. I didn't believe her. I didn't think any woman could be that nuts about conventional respectability. So one day last month I got a wire saying she had eloped with Bennett."

He stopped. There was a silence. Her hands, clinging tensely to her purse were trembling, and he saw it. His gleaming eyes raked over her.

"What the hell do you care?" he asked.

"I don't," she whispered.

"I hadn't seen her since, if that makes you happier. Until last night. When you're in love with a girl and she puts her arms around your neck and cries, what do you do?" He turned a corner and finished it viciously. "You kiss her! You ought to know. You've kissed the wrong guy a time or two in your life, too."

She was very white, but she said nothing. Because he was right.

Shane said, "I'm sorry. That was a rotten thing to say. I'm a heel, Lana. Forget me."

"Shane . . ."

"Promise," he said.

"Promise what?"

"That you'll forget me, forget this whole mess. No matter what happens."

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She choked. "You're asking me to—to be a heel, too,—sort of."

"I'll deny anything you say, Lana. Anything. Last night you were at the bar for a few minutes, your friend didn't show, so you left. That's all I know. Go on back to Mexico or wherever, and marry your Ramón Miguel Vincente, *et cetera.* Wear wild orchids in your hair and eat bananas three times a day. I'm through with you."

He swung in at the curb and reached past her to open the door. "I don't want to be seen with you. There's a cab stand half a block around the corner. Good-bye, Lana. You're sweet kid, but you came five years too late."

"Shane . . ."

"Good-bye," he said again, cutting right through her words.

Then he slammed the car door and drove off, leaving her standing there.

SHE WAS ANGRY for three days. Angry and hurt and bewildered. She thought, *All right, Shane, if that's the way you want it.* And she tried to pretend he had never existed.

Ramón took her out to see the stallion. It was large, magnificent. He was buying it; and the way he fussed about over the plans to get the horse home, one would have thought it was made of diamonds. Lana tried to offer suggestions about getting it home, too, but Ramón only patted her hand and told her to leave the brain-work to him.

Her grandparents gave a small party for them . . . just a few close friends and a lot of fun. Lana flung herself hectically into the gaiety and tried not to remember that not far away a lot of gaiety was going on at a night club, too, with Shane Trevor wandering about, keeping a vigilant eye on things.

And there was the radio. She kept it on most of the time. With those sharp, dreadful voices sniping at her constantly.

There was a mysterious blonde, it seemed. A girl who was rumored to have been in Shane Trevor's private office all that evening. A girl who had been seen leaving the Studio Club with him, after closing time. A pretty girl in a dark wrap, who was estimated to be about twenty-two years old . . .

At least, she thought dully, that sophisticated hairdo and black gown had done a little good.

I don't know any blonde, Shane Trevor said.

And then the police found out about the argument he and the little man had had. They learned that he and Estelle had been in love for years. They learned enough so that Shane had better produce his blonde alibi, but fast.

What blonde? Shane asked with a shrug.

A night club man. Many night club men had records, and their employees were often musclemen and ex-gangsters. Authorities started checking very thoroughly into the past of Shane Trevor. When Lana heard that she thought, *Dear heaven please, please let it be clean . . .* And it was. It was spotless, with a college degree and an excellent war record and a family tree that was as solidly rooted as Plymouth Rock.

Everyone was talking about the blonde. People saw headlines and spoke of it on street corners. She heard it in the hotel lobby, in shops, at her grandmother's. Cita and José and Ramón discussed it.

"The man is quixotic," José said.

"Foolish," Cita agreed, "but marvelous."

Ramón said, "Perhaps he is merely telling the truth."

"Well," Lana murmured, "the Studio Club certainly was full of blondes, that evening. It looked like Hollywood on Saturday night."

"You think there was a blonde?" Ramón asked.

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"Maybe."

"Then why doesn't she say anything?"

Cita said, "Maybe she has a life of her own, Ramón. Maybe she has a husband or something. If the man can wriggle out of it, why should she ruin her life?"

Ramón looked blank. "Is that the way women think?"

"Some women."

He shook his head, "But the man may hang!"

"That is impossible," stated José calmly. "Wealthy men with clever attorneys never hang."

"No," Cita agreed. "He will get five or ten years, which will make him eligible for parole after three years, and eighteen months for good behavior. During the year or two he spends in prison, he can write his biography, or something."

"You are cynical, *carrissima*," José reproved. Then his hand covered hers and he added softly, in Spanish, "But I love you very much."

Ramón looked at Lana. She wore sheer silk in frost green. Her hair was palest gold, curling softly over her shoulders. Her mouth was a deep, lovely red, but her skin had an unaccustomed pallor that had been there for several days.

He spoke gently. "There are a great many things I shall never understand about women, Lana. Do you think, too, that love is greater than honor?"

"Don't misquote me, Ramón," Cita protested. "That's not at all what I said!"

He surrendered with a shrug. "Very well. But one thing I know. If the blonde were my wife, I should beat her and then phone the police. Then I should leave her."

"Because," Lana said huskily, "she lied to you?"

"No. Because she could stand silent and watch a man being ruined."

Lana sat motionless. *But Shane will deny it; anything I say he will deny. If I involve myself, I will have to fight Shane every inch of the way, prove irrefutably every word I utter . . .*

Slowly she lifted her lashes to meet Ramón's dark eyes. But already he was turning away, speaking to José . . . It had been just a remark. An opinion. He suspected nothing at all.

But when they left the coffee shop, they saw brand new headlines on the newspapers that said Shane Trévor had been indicted for the murder of George Allen Bennett.

"LANA . . ."

"Yes, Cita?"

"I want you to tell me about it."

Cita was no dramatic, emotional Latin. She was sensible. Hard-headed, sometimes. She knew the answers to a lot of things that plagued Lana, because twenty years ago she had been very much like Lana.

But how could she explain to Cita or to anyone about a man, not really redheaded, who had held her in his arms, and kissed her until the stars changed their courses, while he loved another girl and Lana loved another man?

She whispered, "There is nothing to tell."

"All right, cupcake," Cita said gently. "If that's the way you want it. There's just one thing I have to say, and then I'll shut up forever. It's about Ramón."

"Ramón?"

"Or any man, darling. They have such lovely ideals. With halos, and everything. But you know how Ramón feels about you. No matter what he says, you know what he'll really do, if he ever finds out."

She was dead white. "But Shane—"

"He'll get out of it. Julius Stern is his lawyer, and he never loses. If he can't get out of a trial, Stern will whitewash him so completely the jury will be in tears."

"And everyone will believe Shane did it, but had a smart lawyer? He didn't do

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it, Cita. He couldn't have. Believe me!"

"Darling, it's Shane Trevor or Ramón. Make no mistake about it."

Shane or Ramón . . . Shane or Ramón! The words went round and around in her mind, repeating themselves like a spinning record. And she knew it was as her mother had said. Shane would get out of it somehow, but if she cleared him, Ramón would never forgive her for being involved.

Ramón, she thought unhappily tossing on her pillow all night. Dark, romantic, tender. Idealistic, expecting her to be perfect, scolding her when she wasn't . . . loving her whether she was good or bad.

But he would not love her if he ever learned she was mixed up with another man. A lot of things Ramón would take, but not that. He was much too jealous, too possessive. The only reason she had been able to get away with that wild talk about a fictitious Reynolds St. Alban was that Ramon had felt terribly guilty over standing her up that night. He had felt it was chiefly his own fault. But she knew that he was remembering, wondering—torn between suspicion and his own sense of guilt.

Shane, whom she hated. Or Ramón, whom she loved.

The next morning, the radio was still talking about Shane's mysterious blonde. The newspapers quoted Julius Stern as saying:

> My client is innocent. I am going to find that girl if I have to go through the city with a dragnet.

He could do it, she realized. He was the state's most outstanding criminal lawyer with, it was rumored, a vast net of spies and hirelings. If she wanted to marry Ramón, she had better take the next plane for home.

All she had to do was to pick up the telephone and say, "Mr. Stern, I am Shane Trevor's blonde . . ."

Shane would try to force the words right back into her teeth, but if she said it to Julius Stern, instead of to Shane . . .

What if Shane were right? What if he could get out of this without an alibi and without a trial? Then no one would be hurt. She could marry Ramón; and eventually Estelle, who surely had learned a lesson in love, would marry Shane. Why couldn't it work out that way? Why did her life have to be smashed to save Shane's?

SHE WENT DOWN to see him, that afternoon. Knowing quite well that he did not want to see her in the least. Knowing he would be angry at her. Knowing, even, that it was dangerous. But she had to go.

She wore soft, cool white with a big floppy hat and a wisp of mint-green at her waist. Wide, tawny eyes, pale gold hair sifting across her shoulders.

Shane's blonde, whom he loathed . . .

The guard unlocked the cell so she could go in. And Shane's bright blue eyes, looking down at her, were furious.

"You little fool!" he said.

She whispered, "Shane, I had to see you."

"That's what you said the other night. You don't have to. You just want to. You're stupid, brainless, idiotic . . ." He stopped.

She was small and still. "All right, I just wanted to, then."

"Do you think these cops can't add? Do you think that guard can't think?"

"Shane, I'm going to tell them."

"I'll deny it."

"Go ahead. I'm sure a clever man like Julius Stern can think up some way to substantiate it, in spite of your denials. It isn't worth it, Shane—my reputation against your life."

"Don't you realize what Estelle said? She heard that shot at three-fifteen. You go telling people you were at my place

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that time in the morning, and you know what they'll think. I'll get out of this. Stern's a magician."

She was white. "Stop it, Shane. It's no use."

"You pick up a guy in a bar. You spend four hours alone in his private office. Then he takes you out in the country, and you don't get home until nearly five. Good grief, Lana, don't you realize how it sounds?"

She closed her eyes against the brilliant rage in his. She said nothing. Shane's voice struck at her with a low tautness.

"Stop looking like that. So soft. So young. So . . . so damned easy to hurt."

She whispered, "You want to hurt me. Everything you say and do . . ."

"Maybe I do. Why don't you go back to Nicaragua? Why don't you let me alone? I'm not your kind of man. I'll mess up your life, spoil all that pretty innocence. Oh, Lana—" He stopped, then turned away toward the window.

It was a very small window, up high, and barred. A shaft of sunlight came through and turned his hair to deep copper. He ran his fingers through it with a tinge of desperation, then rammed his hands into his pockets.

"Got a cigarette, baby? I'm out."

She found one and gave it to him. Her fingers shook a little as she lighted it.

Shane watched her. His voice was soft as velvet.

"It's biological, Lana. That's all."

"Shane . . ."

"You've known this guy all your life. That's love. This isn't."

Her eyes were misty. "I know that."

"Then get out. While the getting is good."

She shook her head. "I couldn't live with myself."

He stood there. Things were in his eyes—pride and anger and tenderness and something else she could not identify that started her heart swinging from one side to the other like a pendulum.

Shane's lips moved. "See what I mean? Biology. One little move and you'd be in my arms. I want you there so damn much I don't dare to move a muscle. Be a good kid, will you Lana, and get out of here? And keep your mouth shut. If you have any sense at all, keep your mouth shut!"

"Shane . . ." she whispered numbly.

"Guard!" he called.

SO SHE WENT. Woodenly. As if it were a little mechanical doll that had been wound up.

Biology, he had said. You were a woman and you met a man and your heart started making a fool of itself. There was no logic or intelligence to it. It was pure instinct, a blind, unreasoning emotion that did not count the cost or remember commitments.

She would get over it. Maybe she would never forget it. Maybe she would always wonder a little why it was Shane who could do this to her, and not Ramón. But she'd get over it.

She said to the guard, when they were out of Shane's hearing, "I want to see the police chief."

He grinned, his gaze sidling over her. "We're way ahead of you blondie. The Chief wants to see you, too!"

She told them everything. About Al, who had seen them leave the Studio Club. About a servant at Shane's country place, who had seen them. About the Hotel Williston keeping doormen on a twenty-four-hour schedule, and the one called Otto, who would remember opening Shane's car door at twenty minutes to five in the morning, for Lana to step out.

Let Shane Trevor deny his way out of that, if he could!

She took a cab home, crying a little all the way. Trying not to. Trying to think what she was going to tell Ramón; and quickly, before the extras hit the street

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corners to scream the identity of Shane's blonde. From Nicaragua. They wouldn't miss an exotic touch like that.

Ramón was not at the hotel. He did not arrive for two hours, a frantic two hours in which Lana planned and replanned what she would say to him. Reporters came to take her picture. And when Cita flatly refused to permit such a thing, they fired a barrage of questions at them, while one stole a photograph of Lana that was on a table.

It was José who got rid of them. Wonderful José, being superbly calm though he had only a hazy grasp of what it was about or why. He closed the door and locked it and said. "Now, young lady?"

And Lana flung herself into his arms and wept bitterly while she tried to explain something she could not herself understand.

Cita said gloomily. "Ramón will be fit to be tied."

But he was not.

WHEN HE CAME, it was quite plain that he knew all about it. All, at least, that came out in the earliest papers. But he did not storm, as they expected. He was too quiet, and very pale under his brownness.

Chaperonage or not, Cita and José faded swiftly when Ramón came in.

Lana stood by the window. Small, slender, lost. And they stared at each other across the width of the room.

She whispered, when the silence became unendurable, "Say it, Ramón. Anything. I have it coming."

His dark eyes were still as night. Slowly he walked over to her. "There is nothing to say, is there, Lana? It is done."

"I had to tell them, Ramón. I had to."

"Yes." He stared down at her, rather blindly. And then he lifted his hand to touch her hair. "Yes, of course."

"Ramón." It was hardly a sound. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"I love you," Ramon said. "I don't know what else to say."

"You mean that you—you're not—through with me? You want to go ahead and marry me? Nothing is to be changed?"

"Everything has been changed, Lana. Everything. And it will never be the same again. But I love you." His arms closed around her, rather helplessly. And he murmured in her hair, "*Querida,* I love you . . ."

And that was when Lana knew that she could never marry him.

She stood there, knowing that nothing had changed in the way she felt about him. She loved him, she always had, she always would. She loved José, too. And Cita. But that was not the way a girl was supposed to marry.

What was it Shane had called it? *Biology.* There was no biology whatever in the way she loved Ramón. He was a big brother, an adored idol who bullied her and consoled her and made love to her without really knowing what love could be like.

Or maybe he did know. Maybe Ramón knew, but Lana never had. Not until Shane Trevor had kissed her, one night.

Something between them had been destroyed this afternoon. Part of Ramón's love, maybe. Part of his trust in her. And nearly all of that pretty angel's halo he liked to have her wear.

For Ramón knew now that Lana never would be the girl he wanted her to be. She might try, but she could not do it. Ever.

She drew out of his arms, her eyes searching his. Then her fingers groped for the ring he had given her. Their engagement ring. His hands closed over hers, stopping her.

"No, Lana!"

"Ramón." She was crying a little. "There are things that were not in the papers. I'm in love with him. I love you,

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but I'm in love with him. Can you understand that?"

"Shane Trevor?"

"Yes," she whispered, her chin lifting. And when she said it there was a soft, radiant wonder in it. "Yes, Ramón. Shane Trevor."

"I see," he said.

And maybe he did.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lana Goes to Heaven

SO THEY WERE going back to Nicaragua. Ramón was leaving that night by plane, having made the final arrangements in the afternoon for shipping the stallion down. The day after tomorrow Cita and José were taking Lana home, too.

They were kind and understanding. A little too kind, maybe, but families are like that. Even her grandparents went all out, for TACT in big letters. Lana did not care, very much. The part of her that might have cared felt big and empty and quite dead.

They let Shane out of jail. He telephoned her. Briefly. Just hello, and thanks, and good-bye. With only one question that had to be answered . . .

"How did Ramón take it?"

"Wonderfully," Lana said.

So that was that.

José thought they should have a gay time on their last night in the States. So they did the town, with an unattached male cousin of Lana's who looked really quite handsome in a tuxedo and was an exceptionally good dancer.

They did nearly every night spot. José and the cousin avoided any mention of the Studio Club, but it was Cita who insisted on going there.

"Maybe," she said, "I can get a glimpse of that red-headed man. After all, I should know what he looks like!"

Very white, Lana said, *yes, Cita should know.*

"I wonder," murmured her cousin, "if he really—" And then he remembered and stopped quite abruptly.

José said, "I imagine a great many people will always wonder *if*, Robert. But Lana is not usually a liar."

The cousin grew very embarrassed, made a halting attempt to explain that he had been thinking of something else entirely, and then ruined it all with an apology.

Shane did not seem to be around. It was a good thing. Facing a man who does not want you is one thing, but when you realize you are madly in love with him, it becomes something else.

It was when she was dancing with Robert that Lana realized how utterly impossible it would be for her to leave the country without telling Shane good-bye.

Just to see him again . . . once. And maybe if she was very careful and made it brief, he would be nice to her. Civil, anyway. So she would have a few moments more of him to remember.

She did not try to make an excuse. She said, "I'm going to say good-bye to Shane."

And she went upstairs.

Al was on duty this time, wearing a custom-cut suit that looked so nice you hardly noticed all the muscles.

"Oh, hello," he greeted. "Don't I know you?"

"You ought to," Lana said.

He grinned and reached for the intercom. "Shane, your blonde's here."

RED-HEADED . . . terribly. Pure copper where the light gleamed against it; brown mahogany in the shadows. Brilliant blue eyes that said nothing, but said it vividly. He was seated at the desk when she came in. He rose, but did not leave it.

"Hello, Lana." It was even, almost

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expressionless. "I've only a few minutes. Estelle's on her way over."

Estelle. Well, that was the way to do it . . . directly, like a slap in the face.

Lana said, "I'm going home in the morning. I just wanted to say good-bye."

"In the morning?"

"José thinks that the States are getting too hot for me."

"I can see his point. The papers seem to be particularly intrigued with the Latin-American angle. Step-daughter of a former vice-consul, and all that. How did they ever happen to leave Ramón's name out of it so completely? That would look swell in print. Ramón Miguel Vincente, *et cetera.*"

She shook her head. "I don't know, I guess it was just luck. Luck, and his not being there when they came around."

"Lana," he said, "be truthful. Did you realize the stink you were letting yourself in for?"

"Yes," she said, not quite steadily.

"And still you went ahead."

"Shane, let's not go into that. I just came to say good bye . . . and Estelle is coming . . ."

"Sure." He looked down at the desk before him, without touching it. Then he ran tense fingers through his hair.

And then he walked over to her, those fierce blue eyes staring straight back into hers.

"So," he said, "there is a girl in the world who doesn't give a hang for conventional respectability."

She went white. "But I do, Shane."

"You kicked it out the door."

"I'm always kicking it out the door. I try and try, and something happens. If I had behaved myself, I never would have come here that night without Ramón."

"Wearing," Shane said, "the wickedest, sweetest, most enticing little dress I ever saw on a dame—and believe me, in my business I've seen plenty."

"I know. But I threw it away."

"Ramón?"

"Ramón . . ." she whispered, holding her left hand so he could not see the place where the ring had been.

The door opened without warning. No phone calls. No intercom. And Estelle stood there. Dark as a dream, lovely as a vision, in black chiffon that could have been a poignant mourning, but managed to be breathtaking instead.

She closed the door softly behind her and leaned against it. Her dark eyes moved from Shane to Lana, and then back.

She murmured, "So this is your Nicaraguan blonde?"

"Miss Martinez, Mrs. Bennett," Shane said evenly.

"She's beautiful, Shane. A beautiful alibi. But aren't you cradle-snatching, just a little?"

"Maybe. Just a little."

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"I expected to see you alone."

"Lana is in this up to her neck."

"Lana!" Estelle cried scornfully. "That's all I've seen in the papers for two straight days—Lana, Lana, Lana! With her heaven-sent smile and her innocent eyes. I could lie there in that stinking hospital and rot, for all anyone cared! Even you, Shane—you didn't phone me or come near me—nothing!"

SHANE WALKED OVER to her. He said with a deadly softness, "No, I didn't, did I? Should I have, Estelle? You wanted background. Conventional niceness. That's what you married—that and a few million bucks. Now you've got it all, but don't make any mistake about the rest of it. You can't buy me like a toy and set me down in your pretty background."

She was crying bitterly. "But I did it for you, Shane! Don't you understand?"

"Estelle," he said, warningly, "be careful! Lana's here."

"Shane, he was saying perfectly horrible things to me. Calling me names, and —and I didn't know what I was doing. Shane, I didn't know! The gun was right there in his desk drawer, and—and the way he went limp—"

Shane said furiously, "So you lied about the time! You said it was after three. But it was before one. Wasn't it?"

"I had to lie, Shane! It was too soon after we came into the house. The servants would have guessed. But their quarters are in the other end of the house—they never heard it—"

"Estelle, when you lied, did you have any idea of getting even with me? You didn't have to say anything. You didn't have to establish the time as being after I'd have left the club. You managed to get me thrown into jail and Lana's name smeared—an eighteen-year-old kid—"

"Lana!" Estelle screamed it. "Will you shut up about Lana?"

Shane pushed her away from the door and opened it. "Al," he said.

Estelle was sobbing now. Clinging to him and sobbing. Shane's eyes lifted to Lana's and held. Cool. Remote.

"Estelle, listen to me. I haven't heard anything, do you understand? Neither has Lana. But they'll get you, Estelle, sooner or later. Because you have no self-control. You lose your temper, and the devil take the hindmost."

"Shane, I love you."

"Sure, why not? It's a very cheap little word, love. Anyone can throw it around. Get her a cab, Al. Put her in it."

"Do I send someone with her?"

"No."

"Shane," Estelle whispered. "It was because of you—"

"It was because of *you*!" Shane said. He even smiled when he said it. "Precious, beautiful, little you, Estelle. You're the one you love so madly. I hope you'll be happy together."

Al took her out.

There was a silence. It grew longer.

"Well," Shane said tiredly, "Trevor, the heel, has done it again."

She whispered, "Are you supposed to love a—murderess?"

"If I loved her, I wouldn't give a damn what she was. But I don't love her. The mere word gives me acute nausea."

He leaned on the edge of his desk, staring at the floor.

"Lana—"

"Yes, Shane," she whispered.

His gaze lifted to her. And then, staring, his eyes grew narrower until they were mere glittering slits. He walked toward her as if she were not there. Right past her he went, to the fireplace. She turned.

FOR A MOMENT nothing seemed wrong. Until he straightened the picture over the mantel. But it was tilted so

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imperceptibly that she had already looked at it several times without noticing it.

He crouched down and looked up into the opening. He stayed there motionless for so long that Lana went over to sit on her heels and look, too.

And dangling by a thin wire down the chimney was a small microphone.

They looked at each other. Brilliant blue eyes. Widened tawny eyes.

"Estelle . . ." Lana whispered.

And in the distance they heard a police siren.

Shane rose, drawing her to her feet.

She saw his eyes change into something that was beautiful and breath-taking, in that split instant before the curtain dropped. Then he spoke evenly.

"Is Ramón downstairs?"

She shook her head numbly.

"Gone home?"

She nodded.

"Couldn't he take it?"

"He—he took it wonderfully. But—"

"But what?" Shane asked.

But I'm in love with you. And you're sick of the very word; it nauseates you. But you may have a few noble instincts, darling. You may propose to me because of the gossip . . . or because of Ramón . . . and that would hurt worse than anything you ever have said or done . . .

She could not tell him. She hated lies, but she had to invent one.

"He bought a horse. He took the boat down so he could play nursemaid to it. It's that kind of a horse. The boat is much slower than a plane, you know."

"And the ring?"

"It went as security on the horse. Temporarily. Until he gets home to raise the rest of the money."

"I see," Shane said slowly, looking down at her.

He let her hands go, and Lana realized that she was trembling rather badly. She had to get out of here. Quickly, before she did something insanely irresponsible, —like reaching up to draw his face down to hers in blind recklessness.

She turned and walked away from him, without looking or caring where she was going. A window stopped her. A window that looked out onto a roof deck garden. She hadn't known there was a roof deck.

Shane was behind her. "It's a funny thing. I've never met a girl before who could make me want to sell the Club."

Her fingers clenched tensely into her palms. "Sell it?"

"I had an offer this morning. Almost too good an offer to turn down. Only I love the place. I don't know what I'd do without it."

"Then why not keep it?"

He was so close that she could feel the warmth of his body. And he said, very softly, "Because I don't know what I'd do without you, either. And Lana, you don't belong in a night club."

She did not move. She could not breathe. Her heart had stopped, with a little wrench.

"I've never tried to take another guy's girl before. It's not exactly cricket, I've heard. Especially if he's not around to fight back."

She was crying. She couldn't help it. She turned, and Shane's arms were around her, fiercely tight, hurting her . . . and she loved it.

"I'm not his girl," she sobbed, "I'm not, Shane. And you're not in love with me, it's just a cheap little word—"

"Who said *love*?" Shane asked, tipping her face up. She saw his eyes, brilliant, dazzling. And his wide grin was the most breathtaking thing in the world.

"This is biology," he said. "Darling, it's basic."

And when his mouth came down against hers, she knew he was right. It was basic.

And it was beautiful.

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Mister Christmas

By

BILL SEVERN

Carol couldn't see Mike's grin for the tears in her eyes. But she knew it was there—as big as his heart.

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Christmas day gave Mike back to Carol, and brought love carolling to her heart.

A BRISK AFTERNOON wind swayed the white plastic ornaments on the giant Christmas tree above the skating rink in Rockefeller Plaza, the biggest Christmas tree in the world. On the glazed rectangle of ice, bright-costumed skaters glided to the rhythm of *Jingle Bells* as loudspeakers filled the skyscraper canyon with holiday music.

Carol Barton stepped from the taxi and stood a second in front of the building, listening and smiling a bit. A sun-haired girl in a smart gray suit with a new sheared beaver coat draped around her slender shoulders as though there hadn't

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been time to put her arms into the sleeves. The coat was a present to herself. Impulsively, Carol gave her smile to the uniformed doorman and told him, "Merry Christmas."

He turned and shared the smile. "Same to you, lady." He laughed. "And Happy New Year."

She pushed through the revolving door into the almost deserted lobby of the big building. Most of the offices were closed. People were home with their families, spending Christmas with those they loved. Carol shook her head and was amused at herself as she crossed to the elevators. She was getting as sentimental as a greeting card.

It would be a Happy New Year, the very best year of her life. She was really going places with this new assignment; Carol Barton was on her way to the top. Writing her column from Washington instead of New York meant it would be an A-wire feature rather than something mailed out to the papers on a clip sheet.

The excitement that quickened Carol's pulses as she got out at the fourth floor had nothing to do with Christmas. It was a heady sense of achievement, stepping across the threshold to success. The big barn of a newsroom that was the nerve-center of Amalgamated Press clicked with typewriters busy producing copy for the nation's papers. Operators fed their perforated tape into the teletypes that ground out sixty words a minute for tomorrow's fat Sunday editions across the country. At the end of the room were glass-paneled doors. Behind the one marked FEATURE EDITOR and J. C. MAYSE, was Carol's future.

She felt like running to that door. It meant so much, so very much. She passed the sports desk and the rack of world maps that partitioned the foreign news department into a square of its own.

"Carol!"

She halted. She knew that voice. But she couldn't believe it. Michael Dean was in Tokyo or Pakistan, or somewhere oceans and miles away. Carol whirled around and saw him. "Mike!"

HE CAUGHT HER in his arms. He swung her from the floor and hugged her and kissed her. Laughing, he put her down and kept her hands. "Oh, gee," he said. "Gosh, Carol—this is swell."

"Hi, stranger." Her laughter was as warm as his. "How long has it been, Mike?"

"Too long." He held her away a little. "My favorite blonde." Mike winked. "Hey, I heard about you. Nice going, pal. Washington's a good place to be."

"I've been lucky."

"And clever with the word mill. I've been reading some of your stuff, Carol. It's on the beam."

"You do all right, too. Correspondent's Club Award." She made a tiny bow. "May I touch the famous Michael Dean?"

He grinned and offered his arm. Smiling, Carol touched it. Same grin; same Mike. Two years hadn't changed him. Nothing ever would. Even that crooked little pull to his tie and the expensive but wrinkled brown tweed suit looked the same. If he had combed his tousled sandy hair since the last time she had seen him, the comb obviously had lost the battle. Mike always looked like he had just come out of a wind storm or was about to rush into some tornado of his own. Big, easy-going, handsome Irish and with the whole world as his home. Any place he tossed his jacket or opened his battered portable typewriter.

Two years ago, Carol had been so in love with him she had no dreams Mike didn't own. He never guessed it was more than being pals when they worked together in the Baltimore bureau, the best friends who ever borrowed a buck from each other or shared supper or a few light kisses. The idea that she might have

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married him just never entered Mike's mind. He lived in hotels because an apartment would have meant a lease; he owned nothing, wanted nothing that would tie him down.

Her dreams were different now. They matched his. Tonight, Washington and the next month maybe Chicago or San Francisco or wherever her typewriter took her. J. C. had hinted there would be roving assignments part of the year if the column clicked as well as he expected. The only obligations Carol had were to her own career. "I thought you were somewhere in the wilds of Asia," she said.

"Flew in from the Coast this morning. I'm on my way to London. New York is just a whistle-stop until Monday." Mike frowned. "You're leaving for Washington tonight?"

"This afternoon. As soon as I talk to J. C." She glanced past him to the office. "There's a 3:30 train."

"Oh, that soon? Well, look—I'll wait for you. Go on in and see him." His grin came back. "I tried to call you at the hotel, but you'd left. Thought maybe we could have Christmas dinner together and talk over old times. Anyhow, I can ride down to the station with you in the cab."

"Mike, I'm sorry." Carol looked up at him and shook her head. "That's how it goes in this racket, isn't it? Christmas is just another day in the week." She sighed a little. "I won't be long with J. C." Carol tightened her fingers on Mike's arm a second and dropped her hand. "We'll have an hour. I've already checked through my bags."

J. C. had a lot to say about the kind of a column he expected her to write and Carol knew it was important. She listened and nodded and briefly outlined a few ideas she had in mind, but she couldn't help wishing he would cut it short.

He stook behind his desk finally. "I guess that's about all. Sorry you have to make the trip today, but I want you to get started in Washington on Monday." J. C. came around the desk and opened the door. "You know the kind of a job I want and I know you can do it. Good luck."

"Thanks. I'll do my best."

"I know that, too." He nodded pleasantly. "You're a good newsman, Carol. Keep your eye on the ball."

MIKE WAS STANDING at one of the big windows, a long unflicked ash on the cigarette between his fingers as he looked out at the Plaza. Carol came up behind him. "Pretty, isn't it? The tree and everything."

"They do it up right." He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. "But why does anybody spend Christmas here?" Mike answered himself as he took her arm. "Tourists, probably. Visitors with no better place to go." He smiled. "Like us, Carol."

She looked down at the skaters. "They seem happy enough. I guess it doesn't make much difference as long as you feel like Christmas." Carol turned away slowly. "Remember the party we didn't have that Christmas in Baltimore, Mike?"

He laughed. "You'll never let me forget it, will you?"

"I still think you were afraid of my cooking."

"Sure. I shot the senator myself, just to get out of town."

She laughed with him. "And I ate turkey for a week, trying to get rid of it." She had planned the dinner for a week, too. Turkey and home-made cranberry sauce, marshmallowed sweet potatoes, everything Mike said he used to have for Christmas when he was a kid on the farm. And the tree she had lugged up the three flights to her apartment, the decorations. "I wanted to climb right across that phone wire and choke you when you said you couldn't come."

But she understood even then. It wasn't

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Mike's fault that a wide-eyed radical had chosen Christmas day to go berserk and make one of the biggest news stories of the year. Mike wasn't to blame that Carol sat alone in her apartment that Christmas night with a dead dream and the clear realization that it never was to be. It was odd to remember something so unimportant now and so long ago.

Mike took her to the elevator. "What ever happened to that fellow you were going to marry?"

"Fellow?" She frowned. There never had been anybody like that. "I'm afraid you've got me mixed up with two other girls, Mike."

"No. You used to tell me you were going to find some man with a normal nine-to-five job and settle down in the suburbs where you wouldn't have anything to do with newspapers except read them."

"Oh, *him*." Carol smiled. "I never found him—or maybe I found myself." They went out to the Plaza and the doorman flagged a cab. Mike helped her in and kept her hand. Looking down at her fingers in his, she said, "You had it right, Mike—telling me to keep shooting those features into New York. I wouldn't have the column except for you."

"That's the first time any girl's ever told me I'm a good influence." He grinned. "Or was I? Maybe you'd be married and have ten kids by now if I hadn't sold you on the idea of making a name for yourself."

"I'm not old enough to have ten kids." She wrinkled her nose at him. "Besides, I'm hardly the motherly type."

"I don't know. You'd be right cute knitting tiny garments. And any youngsters looking for a mother could do a lot worse. But you do knit words well."

THE TAXI STOPPED for a traffic light and the driver turned around to include himself in the talk. "I've got five," he confided proudly. "All boys." The tinkling bell of a corner Santa Claus sounded loud in the cab a moment. He took a wallet from his pocket. "That's a picture of 'em." The driver passed it back and shifted gears as the light changed.

Carol glanced at Mike and their eyes shared a silent laughter. There was a warmth about it that brought them close a moment. She showed him the snapshot and handed it to the driver. "They're beautiful children," she said.

"Sure are," Mike agreed. "Must be tough having to work today instead of being with them."

"That's how it goes." The cabby lifted his shoulders. "But it ain't too bad. I knock off at six. I mean you don't mind working when you know Christmas will be home waiting for you. That's what counts." He swung the cab from the avenue into the long ramp at the side of Penn Station and slowed it to the cement island where other travelers stood with their bags. "Hope you and the missus have a good trip."

"We're not—" Carol started. She caught Mike's wink and laughed again. The man apparently had heard only a snatch of their conversation.

"Thanks," Mike said. He pulled two crumpled bills and a handful of change from his pocket. Mike unfolded one of the bills and gave it to the driver. Carol saw it was a ten. "Merry Christmas," Mike told him. "Buy the kids something for us."

"Thank you, mister. Merry Christmas to you."

"Oh, Mike . . ." Carol shook her head. "You'd give away the shirt off your back if it wasn't buttoned on you."

"There's nobody else to buy gifts for." He took her arm. "Which reminds me—what would you like Santa to bring you, Carol?"

"Don't be silly." She pulled back as

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he started to lead her toward the steps and the shops on the upper level. "Besides, there isn't time."

"Sure there is." Mike glanced at his watch. "Better take me up on it while I'm in the mood. Anything but a mink coat."

"How did you guess? That's exactly what I want." Carol tugged at his sleeve again. "Please, Mike—don't be foolish."

He caught his arm around her shoulders. His other arm came under her knees and scooped her from the floor. Laughing, holding her high in his arms, he started up the broad steps with her. Everybody in the station seemed to be laughing, too. Down behind them at the information desk, a toddling freckle-faced boy with hair as red as Carol's cheeks pointed and yelled," Hey, ma! Look!"

"Put me down!" Carol squealed. "Mike!" She kicked and twisted in his arms, but she was laughing as hard as he was. Her eyes filled with laughter as he carried her up the steps.

AT THE TOP, he swung her to the floor, steadying her with his hands on her shoulders. "Say 'no' to me, will you?" He grinned. "Now, if you'll come quietly . . ."

"Brute," Carol said. "Cave man. Bully."

"Shh." Mike winked. "People *will* think we're married."

The drugstore was open. Mike found a wind-up Santa Claus with a music box beneath it that played *Jingle Bells*. Carol searched for something unusual and finally ended up buying him a brown necktie to go with his suit.

"Just what I need." Mike slipped the knot of the tie he was wearing and bunched it into a ball that he shoved into his coat pocket. While the amused salesgirl watched, he flipped up his collar and put on the new one. The knot was still crookedly off-center. "How do I look?"

"Like Mike Dean." Carol smiled and patted it straight for him. "We'd better get downstairs. I don't want to miss my train."

The outer waiting room seemed almost deserted. People didn't travel unless they had to on Christmas day. A depressing place without a crowd to break the feeling of being in an enormous cage of train gates and steel girders. Cold and bare. Their high spirits died as the excitement ran out on them. "There might be the time for a drink," Mike said.

"I'd better not." Carol saw the attendant move over toward the red and gold signs that would announce the train was ready. She glanced up at Mike and took her eyes away. "This has been swell—even for a little while. I hope it won't be another two years."

He took her hand. "There's a later train, Carol. One every hour." Mike

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waited until she looked at him again. "Does it have to be this one?"

"I'm afraid so. Hal Martin will be at Union Station to meet me when I get in. He's arranged for my room at the hotel and everything."

"You could phone him." His fingers tightened on hers. "Tell him you missed it."

She wanted to; she wanted another hour with Mike. But it couldn't really mean anything. Fun and the sake of old times. What was waiting for her in Washington meant more. "It wouldn't be a good way to start a new assignment. Martin will be my boss."

"Sure." Mike let out his breath slowly and released her hand. "That comes first."

"Wouldn't it with you?"

"Yes."

The sign went up. The station loudspeaker crackled with the train announcement . . . "now loading on track thirteen east and west gates."

NEITHER OF THEM moved. People walked around them and through the gates. Carol shifted her purse and the toy Santa to her other hand. "Well, Mike—don't get lost in that London fog."

He nodded. "Take care of yourself, Carol. I'll—" He stopped and laughed. "We sound like a damned board of directors meeting. Come here . . ." Mike pulled her into his arms and kissed her. His arms went hard around her a second while Carol held close, kissing him. "So long pal." His voice came out husky. "I'll be seeing you."

"Good bye, Mike." Carol turned away quickly and hurried through the gate. She didn't look back. She didn't want him to see she was crying. Mike might not understand it was just—just Christmas and everything.

There certainly was no reason to cry. No more excuse for silly tears than there had been for the lift of her heart and the crazy flutter-rush of her pulses to his kiss. That was finished two years ago. It had never been, except in her own mind. Now, she had no more need for Mike than he had for her.

As she went into the car, Carol heard someone whisper, "Ma, look. She's cryin'. Why's she cryin', ma?" It was the red-haired boy who had been at the information desk when Mike carried Carol up the stairs.

"Hush, Freddy." His mother pulled him back into the seat. "Finish your crackers. We'll get some milk when the man comes through."

Carol turned to the window and lowered her head a little as she fished into her purse for her compact. She heard the boy say, "But why's everybody cryin'? You and the lady and daddy, even? Gee, I never saw him cry before. Why, huh?"

"Freddy, will you be quiet!" She softened her voice. "Don't ask so many questions. I told you mother has a headache. We're going to grandma's and we'll have a wonderful Christmas. She has a big tree all waiting for us. You know what—I'll bet grandma has some presents for you."

"We got a tree home. Ma, I want to go home with daddy. I don't like this old train and he was going to fix my airplane. Ma, please—"

"Freddy!"

Carol snapped her purse and put it on the seat beside her with Mike's toy Santa Claus on top. As she crossed her legs and unbuttoned her jacket, her arm bumped it. Santa toppled to the aisle between the seats and the key started to whirr around with the jingling tune. Carol picked it up and saw the boy watching. She smiled and held it out to him. "Would you like to play with this awhile?" Carol wound it again. "See how Santa waves his hand?"

"Oh, no, really," the woman said. "I'm

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afraid he'll break it." But she let him take it. "Be careful, Freddy." She looked at Carol and managed a brief smile. "Thanks a lot." Her face flushed slightly as their eyes met, as though she were embarrassed by what Carol had overheard. "I wish we'd start moving. It's sitting here that's hard on him."

"Yes, it's always hard to wait." Carol checked her watch. "We should be leaving now, unless I'm slow." Mike would have left the station already. He'd be in another cab on his way uptown or wherever he was going. He must have friends in New York. Probably he'd find a Christmas party someplace. And there'd be a girl to make it less lonely for him. In her mind, Carol could see him dancing with some girl, making that big grin of his as they discovered the mistletoe.

TWO MORE PASSENGERS came in the other end of the car, but most of the seats remained empty when the train finally jerked forward and bumped and then went ahead again. She closed her eyes and smiled a little. She hoped Mike had a good time. The train rumbled into the tunnel and Carol felt the pressure on her ears as it went beneath the river. Her head rang with a momentary dizziness, as though a giant thumb had been clamped against the tight knot of nerves at the back of her neck.

Behind her, the car door clicked and banged shut. That would be the conductor wanting her ticket. Carol opened her eyes and picked up her purse. The hurried steps down the aisle halted beside her. "Is this seat taken?"

The purse dropped from her hands. It bounced to her lap and fell to the floor. "Mike!"

Carol turned to him, still blinking and trying to get her breath. She shook her head. "What—why—"

"Thought I'd come along for the ride. I can take the next train back from Washington." He grinned. "I had nowhere else to go. New York's a lousy town to spend Christmas in alone." Mike took her bag from the floor. "You wouldn't have dinner with me, so I'll have dinner with you."

For a minute, Carol was afraid she'd really cry. There was no need to be *that* glad. "You are crazy. You're completely mad." But she wanted to throw her arms around him and kiss him for being Mike. The way she smiled, she could feel it down to her heart. There wasn't anybody anywhere ever who could be like him.

"I almost missed it," he said. "I had to run."

"But what about London and everything you have to do?"

"That's Monday." He made a tiny shrug. "What's to do? I could go to the moon and back in that time and have an hour left to buy myself a clean shirt before I hopped the plane."

Across the aisle, Freddy was up on the seat again. He had the toy Santa against the window so the key buzzed the glass loudly as it unwound. Carol followed Mike's glance. "I let him play with it," she said. Freddy's mother caught the boy's shoulder and jerked him back with a warning to behave.

Watching, Mike frowned. Under his breath, he said, "Can't she let the kid have fun? The car's empty. He's not bothering anybody."

"She's in trouble of some kind," Carol whispered. "I think she and her husband had a fight and she left him. She's taking the boy to grandma's."

"Today?" Mike said. "On Christmas?"

The conductor started along the aisle collecting tickets. He paused to say something to the two men up front and laughed with them a minute. He was in a genial mood, trying to spread a bit of cheer among his passengers. Patting Freddy's head, the conductor let him work the punch. He crossed to Carol

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and Mike and took Carol's ticket.

"I'll have to buy a ticket." Mike reached into his pocket and came up with a handful of change. He put it back and pulled out his wallet. "Oh." Mike looked from the conductor to Carol. "I didn't know I was that low. I should have had a traveler's check cashed at the station."

"How much?" She smiled and opened her purse. "Do I get half-fare for my infant friend? He needs a nurse."

"I need somebody, that's sure," Mike said.

"He looks like a good risk, lady." The conductor laughed again. "But I guess you know that." He took the money. "Washington?"

As the conductor moved on, Carol handed Mike ten dollars. "Hey." His face went a deeper red.

"For dinner, Mike." There was no reason for him to be embarrassed. She had borrowed plenty from him and Mike had taken small loans from her before without either of them making anything of it. Not like a man accepting money from a woman or the other way around; just friends who worked in the same office. What made him feel any different about it tonight?

THERE WERE SMALL green cellophane Christmas trees on each table in the diner and the menu offered turkey or baked ham. But the dozen people eating there looked as if they would rather be wherever home was for them. And yet, Carol felt caught up by a holiday mood that was all warm and good inside.

She and Mike had cocktails, touching the rims of their glasses in a gay toast to each other. They laughed and talked and remembered, not saying much with their words but finding a lot of memories behind them. He put his hand over hers. She watched the way the lights of the car danced little shadows across his face, softening his eyes as they found hers.

"Remember," he said, "the night we were driving back from Annapolis and got a yen to go dancing? And we couldn't find anyplace open so we parked the car and turned on the radio and danced right there in that road off the highway?"

"Remember," she asked, "the time we both had to work on New Year's Eve and you went out and got hot dogs and orange juice and brought back the blind man with the accordion to play *Auld Lang Syne* for us?"

The door to the diner opened and Freddy came in with his mother. He was pulling at her arm, dragging back. "I don't wanna eat."

"Freddy, please. You haven't had a thing since breakfast. Maybe they have chicken. You like chicken." She sounded as close to tears as Freddy.

Carol looked up at Mike and shook her head a little. His frown went deep. There was more in Mike's expression than feeling sorry for the boy. Sympathy, but a sort of anger, too. He turned back to Carol and glanced at her hand in his. His fingers tightened momentarily, as though he wanted to draw her close and hold her there against the loneliness that parted people Christmas day.

The waiter brought their dessert. Plum pudding with a rich hard sauce. But the taste of it was flat in Carol's mouth. The holiday mood was gone. She was a girl on a train to Washington and Mike was a friend who would fly to London on Monday. That was real, not the rest of it.

Mike looked at his wrist watch as if he sensed what she was thinking. "Half an hour and we'll be in Philadelphia."

"Yes. It's not much more than halfway from there."

He paid the check and they left the diner. Carol walked ahead of him through the train. Mike stopped at the door to their car. "Let's have a cigarette before we go back."

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"All right."

The wind that swept up from the tracks was cold and blustery in the small platform between the cars, making little clouds of their words and quickly sweeping them away. Mike cupped the match in his hands, shielding the leaping flame as Carol leaned close. It flicked out and she raised her head, waiting for him to strike another match. Their eyes met and he held her eyes with his. "Carol . . ." Mike took her in his arms.

"Nice brand you smoke, mister." She laughed softly, taking the kiss that meant they liked each other. Lightly and half-jokingly, knowing it was nothing more than that.

BUT MIKE MADE more of it. His arms suddenly were hard, almost demanding, as though he were fighting her laughter and fighting something within himself.

Carol had wanted it this way once. For a moment, the old dreams came back. Her arms slipped around him and she pressed close, giving herself to the swift eagerness that turned aside the reality of everything that had happened since. But there was no going back to what might have been. Mike had no more use for a wife than he had for a home.

She moved from him. Carol found her smile and lifted it gently between them. "It is Christmas, isn't it?" she said.

He took his arms away slowly. She could feel how he was looking at her. "Washington means that much to you?"

"As much as London means to you." Carol opened the door to the car. "We both know what we want, Mike. Let's not say a lot of foolish things."

The train was in the outskirts of Philadelphia when Freddy and his mother returned to their seats. The woman leaned back with her eyes shut and her hand to her head. Freddy picked up the toy Santa and played with it a minute. He threw it down into the aisle and started to cry.

"Freddy!" His mother tried to quiet him.

Watching, Carol was conscious of Mike's tension beside her as he looked at the boy. Mike edged forward, his fingers clenched. There was another explosion of howling and Freddy got spanked.

The conductor came through as the train slowed into the 30th Street Philadelphia station. Mike stopped him. "Can I send a telegram?"

"There'll be a messenger on the platform."

"Right." Mike smiled to Carol briefly and got up. He followed the conductor. She stared after him, puzzled and wondering.

Mike's grin was big when he came back after the train started again. "Just an idea," he said. "I hope it works." He leaned close, lowering his voice and nodding toward Freddy. "Maybe we can give the kid some kind of a Christmas. I wired Ed Nelson at the Baltimore bureau. You remember Ed."

Carol nodded. "But I still don't see—"

"If Ed's not working, Max Franklin will be," Mike interrupted. "They're both right guys and they have kids of their own. I think they'll understand. If we have any luck, Santa Claus ought to make the train."

"Oh, Mike . . ." She hugged his arm. "But there isn't time. And all the stores are closed."

"Paper stores aren't. They can round up something."

THE WHITE-BEARDED man in the red suit didn't get aboard at Baltimore, but he sent a friend. Carol and Mike were both waiting on the steps of the car when Ed Nelson came hustling along the platform. He had a big black and white panda doll under one arm and a stuffed pink horse under the other. His coat pockets bulged with packages. Mike

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shouted to him and waved his arm.

"Hi!" Laughing, out of breath, Ed came to the steps. "You son of a gun, Mike—you're not drunk?" He nodded to Carol. "Hey, this is something. You, too. What gives?" Ed laughed again. "Will they hold the train? I can't go to Washington. I thought maybe it was a gag, but I ripped the town inside out getting here."

"What do I owe you, Ed?"

"Nuts, guy. Where's the kid?"

Carol saw the conductor on the platform. She ran down to him. Quickly, she explained. "Please—it won't take long."

"Don't worry, lady. We've got three minutes anyhow."

She went back to Mike. Through the glass at the top of the door, they watched Ed. They couldn't hear what he was saying to Freddy about being Santa Claus' helper, but they could see the boy's face. He had the kind of a look that would make anybody glad it was Christmas. Carol took Mike's hand and glanced up at him and her eyes were so filled she could hardly make out his grin. But she knew what was there. It was as big as his heart.

Ed's arms were empty when he returned, but Carol guessed he was taking more with him than he had brought. "The boy couldn't even talk," Ed said. "I thought his eyes were going to pop."

The conductor came to the steps. "Okay to start the reindeer rolling?"

They laughed with him and Ed took Mike's hand. "It's been a long time, guy. But you haven't changed. Wish you could get off with me and visit awhile." He turned to Carol and smiled. "I don't know where you two are headed, but I can hope. I always wondered if you'd get wise to yourselves."

"It's not like that," Mike said. "Carol's going to do her column from Washington. I'm just along for the ride between here and London, Ed."

"Yeah?" He shook his head. "Who do you think you're trying to kid?" Ed stepped down to the platform. "It's always been like that." He waved as the train started. "Let me know where to send the rice, will you?"

The conductor dropped the trap and snapped the catch. Carol stood there with Mike a minute and neither of them spoke. The conductor held the car door for them. Carol took her hand from Mike's and went in.

Freddy was out in the aisle with the pink horse. There were toys and paper and bright ribbons all over the seat. His mother looked at Mike. Silently, above the boy's head, her lips framed the word, "Thanks." Freddy didn't question the magic of Santa Claus finding him on a train; it was as simple as believing in Mr. Christmas. The woman knew it was Mike, not Santa. Yet, there seemed to be something of that magic in her eyes, too, as she looked from Mike to Carol. There was a kind of simple faith in her smile that made her seem very young and almost beautiful.

THE TRAIN WAS close to Washington when the conductor came through again. Mike stopped him. "What's the next one out of Union Station for New York?"

"Going right back, you mean?" He gave Mike a questioning glance that included Carol and then shrugged as if it were none of his business. "7:45."

"Right."

Carol looked down at her hands. "I guess I'd better wash up a bit, Mike."

He nodded without answering and stood to let her step past. Carol went to the washroom. Fixing her makeup, she saw her eyes in the mirror, saw the questions in them. She turned away. The doorknob rattled and Carol unlocked the door to go out.

Freddy's mother stood there. "I wanted to tell you—" She smiled. "You've

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both been so wonderful . . . I guess you heard the boy—what he said. That's why you did it." She seemed embarrassed, groping for the words to express what she felt she should explain. "You see, I hated New York. And Freddy's father had a chance to work down here, near my folks." The woman put her hand on Carol's arm. "I was wrong. I just wanted you to know you helped me see what a mistake I made. I'm taking the next train back. Seeing somebody else so much in love, like you and him—well, I guess if you love your man it doesn't make much difference where you live or what. I mean . . ." She smiled again. "I just wanted to say Merry Christmas and—God bless you."

"I—" Carol shook her head. "I'm glad," she said softly. "Merry Christmas to you."

"Washington!" the conductor called.

Carol went with Mike to the end of the car and stood there until the train stopped. He took her arm and helped her down the steps to the platform. They walked slowly to the gate. "I'll have to get a ticket," Mike said. "I'll mail you that ten, Carol—and the fare."

"Your credit's good." Her laugh went flat. She looked around so she wouldn't have to look at him. "Hal Martin should be here. The waiting room, I guess."

"Carol . . ." Mike took her hand.

She faced him, but her eyes still didn't come up to his. "So long, Mike. It was a good Chrsitmas."

"Yes." He dropped her hand. Neither of them moved. "Well, I guess that's the way to New York." Mike nodded. "The ticket windows are over there." His laugh was no better than hers. "If you ever get to London, look me up."

"I'll do that."

"Good bye."

"Good bye, Mike."

He walked away fast. Carol went toward the waiting room. Her steps hurried. She knew people were staring at her, wondering what there was about Christmas night to make a girl cry so hard she couldn't see.

"Carol!"

She stopped.

"Carol, wait!"

She turned and saw Mike. Carol ran to him.

He took her in his arms, held her in his arms, kissing her and saying her name. And when she looked up, she saw his eyes were that way, too. "That guy you wanted to marry and settle down with in the suburbs," he said. "I can get a job here in Washington, Carol. And you can go on writing your column—whatever you want."

"Just you, Mike." She clung to him, her face pressed hard against his shoulder. "How long would it take a girl to get—a passport to London?"

People moved around them toward the train for New York; people smiling at these two who loved as if they didn't care who watched. Somewhere behind her, Carol heard the tiny tinkle of a music box playing *Jingle Bells*. A boy's voice piped "Hey, ma! Look!"

And a woman answered, "I know."

— TO OUR READERS —

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Headline for Her Heart

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By CORAL LEE BAXTER

♥

The story that broke on a stormy night wasn't the biggest Willow had known, but it brought her the greatest love.

WILLOW HOUGH STARED down unseeingly at a copy of the state edition of *The Morning Star* spread out on her desk, still fragrant with the odor of fresh ink. Why couldn't she make up her mind, she of all people, owner and executive editor of *The Star* whose job it was to decide important issues a dozen times nightly?

As close friends, sharing many interests

"Don't ever scare me like that again." His arms crushed her to him, and she lifted soft, eager lips to his wet face.

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in common, she and Stuart Chase hit it off swell. But as man and wife—?

She had to give Stu a definite answer. Because at dinner tonight she'd promised to let him know one way or the other, tomorrow afternoon at the Chalfonte cocktail lounge.

Well, make up your mind, woman!

Lightning flickered sullenly through the multicolored neon glow outside the open windows of her fifth floor office. The city lay blanketed in the humid heat of a southern December night. Downstairs, a half floor below street level, big presses were smoothly rolling out the first early city edition.

She squirmed restlessly in her chair, fighting to keep her mind on Stu Chase. Yes or no? Just one of two little words; but there was so much involved. Outside the night was unseasonably hot and sticky, the sort of night when human nerves fray dangerously and passion begets violence.

She was tensely on edge. All evening long she'd felt a big story was about to break—was on its way to happen.

But . . . Stu Chase? Yes or no?

Her phone buzzed metallically. "Well?"

"What's the matter, Red? You sound snappy." It was Freeman French, her managing editor, on the wire. "Feel all right?"

"Jumpy. The heat, maybe. What's on your mind?"

"Look, Red. The best damned news hound this side of the Mason and Dixon Line just walked in and struck me for a job. He's a drifter, never stays anywhere very long, but we sure can use him while we've got him. I've hired him, and he's on his way up for your okay. Shoot him down to the city desk when you're done with him. Oh, yes—his name is Donnely, two N's and one L, first name, Pete."

She cradled the phone, her nerves taut. Something big was due to break for sure. She'd felt the same way the day the tornado ripped devastatingly through town. Or the night a year and a half ago, when her father and mother, all the family she'd possessed—

The man said deep-voiced, "Mr. Hough around?"

She tensely eyed him. Good looking. Not pretty. Sort of rugged. Dark hair, thick and wavy. Dark, intense eyes. Two-piece blue serge suit, immaculate white shirt, blue and white polkadot bow tie. About a hundred and eighty-five. Six feet or better. Pete Donnely, no doubt, with two N's and one L.

She said impulsively, "Mr. Hough won't be in tonight."

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter, except that I was told just now that no one ever starts work here without first coming up to meet Will Hough."

"That's right." She looked past him to the office door that always stood wide open, to its black lettered sign, "Will Hough." Her father had been William Hough. She was Willow Hough. So she'd seen no point in having the sign changed. No, Mr. Hough wouldn't be in tonight—or ever.

"On this sheet," she explained tautly, nagged by that foreboding sense of expectancy, "you call everyone from me—from the boss on down, by their first names. Except where there're duplications, then it's nicknames. I'm Red. That's enough. Just Red."

SHE MUST BE nuts. The heat, perhaps, or from trying to decide about Stu. Why not simply tell Pete who she was? He'd find out sooner or later that the sole owner and executive editor of *The Star* was a twenty-two year old, red-headed, blue-eyed girl. In a white linen suit skirt tonight, and pastel blue blouse.

"I'm Pete, that's enough, merely Pete," he grinned down at her. He hung a long, blue-serge leg across a corner of her desk. "I suppose you're the Old Man's secretary. Going to be nice knowing you,

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but what's the big idea, everybody having to meet the boss?"

"You can't get real teamwork unless people know each other. They can't know each other until they meet each other, including the boss. On this sheet, Pete, that's the big idea, from here right on down to even the newsies."

"Seeing as how it includes you, a nice idea. Hope you're not too dated up, Red. You might have to ditch a few for my sake."

"Always room for one more." With his dark eyes upon her, she felt funny all over. More than just quiveringly expectant like the night when all hell broke loose in the picket lines down at the docks. More like the time when the big story she'd sensed actually slashed in over the wires from out of the night. And her heart was misbehaving oddly. "I'm supposed to shoot you down to the city desk," she remembered, coloring hotly beneath his steady gaze.

"Time enough for that." He straightened, and rounded the end of her desk toward her.

She read his purpose in his eyes. She slowly rose to her feet. And just stood there waiting, pulse pounding. Whatever ailed her?

An arm encircled her. A hard finger tilted her small chin upwards. "Mind, Red?"

"No." Long, violet-black lashes fanned down over flushed cheeks. Her soft mouth lifted for his kiss.

The metallic buzz of her desk phone sheared through the magic of the moment. Pete's arm dropped away from her. Her eyes snapped open. She cheerfully could have ripped that phone out by its roots!

"Allow one," Pete said, picking it up. He listened to the voice that cracked through it from her city desk. "Okay, Chief." He dropped the phone to its cradle and whirled a her. "Fire. Seminole Oil. The refinery. Second alarm going in now. Quick, how do you get there? I'm new in town."

"I'll show you." Sirens wailed distantly as she snatched her white-linen suit jacket down from the coat tree behind her. The window sashes rattled as thunder boomed outside.

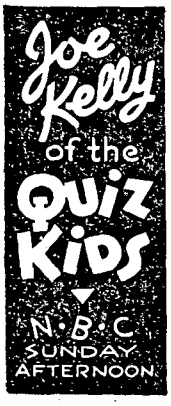
Pete caught her arm. "Where's the stairs? Elevator's too slow."

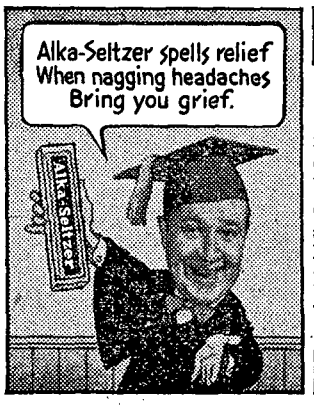
They went down the cement-walled well together, two and three steps at a time.

"My car—in the garage!" she gasped breathlessly.

"Mine's in the street—out front."

WIND-DRIVEN RAIN STRUCK her face. Thunder crashed gigantically. Twin rows of whiteway lights went black as lightning speared vividly through the night, almost blinding her, and came on again a sickly yellow. Willow felt herself hustled into a bulky, stiff raincoat, and





There's Nothing Quite Like Alka-Seltzer

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pushed down on the wet seat of a low topless roadster.

"Straight ahead—ten blocks," she called through the tumult of the storm as the motor roared into life. "Then left."

Pete, huge and shapeless, in a yellow coat like her own, reached to the dashboard, the speedometer already at fifty. A bright, ruby light began to wink regularly across the wet shininess of the car hood.

"You can't use that, Pete. Just fire and police and—"

"And us." He caught her hand and guided it to a dash button. "Push, and keep pushing."

The crescendo scream of a siren leaped out ahead of them.

"Watch that left turn, next corner, Pete!" Never had she felt so exultantly alive and alert. Head bent against the stinging slash of rain, she thumbed the siren and braced herself through the skidding, slewing turn. She thumbed the siren again. "Straight ahead, Pete."

She needn't have told him, the whole night sky flaming crimson behind blinding rapier thrusts of jagged lightning.

Willow laughed softly against the wailing scream of the siren. With her free hand she loosened banked-up curls already streaming wet, and shook soggy hair down over her shoulders. And with that storm-ruined smart coiffure, went Willow Hough, publisher and executive editor. Now she was just Red, a crazy woman in a night gone mad, risking life and limb with a demented man, and ready for anything.

"Cut the siren," he barked, shutting off his winking red light as they skidded to a stop near the flaming refinery.

He sprang to the street, engine idling, sprinted around the car, and pushed her down into the seat as she tried to follow him. "Fast as you go, Red. Head back downtown in my car, and get dried out."

"I'm going with you."

"You are not. Too dangerous where I'll be, and I can't leave you alone here. Get started."

"No!"

He whirled at her. "Don't argue. I haven't time. Get going!"

She slid to the far end of the seat beneath the wheel; then the car shot out onto wet paving blood red in the glare of flames. A roaring, screaming fire truck missed her by only inches. Then Pete had her in his arms.

"Don't ever scare me like that again. You could have been killed!" His arms crushed her to him. Her heart thundered mercilessly.

She lifted soft, eager lips to meet his wet face. His kiss was savagely tempestuous as the night, her response exultantly unrestrained as the leaping flames whose heat seared her cheek.

But even while she clung to him, he lifted and swung her bodily into the idling car. "Get going!" he commanded sternly.

She raised blue eyes to his. "Yes, Pete."

She carefully backed his car through a serpentine tangle of newly dropped fire hose, cut forward through an alley where rain-filled chuck holes threatened to break the car springs, regained smooth paving still unblocked by hose, dodged more screaming fire trucks, and docilely drove downtown, leaving behind her a flaming hell, a special-extra story, and the memory of a burning kiss.

It was ridiculous, the boss of *The Star* meekly obeying the command of its newest reporter. But a singing in her heart told her that she always would be glad to do what he wanted.

Pete already had phoned in his first sketchy details; the big oil plant apparently had been hit by lightning.

"Front page everything you can get," she told Frenchy, "but feature Pete's stuff. By-line it. Play up his story."

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It was nearly one o'clock in the morning when, in her own office, she dried her hair, and letting it hang loose, dropped down behind her desk.

Pete's kiss still seemed to live, throbbing with savage tenderness upon her lips. Out there in a riot of wind, water, and flame, she'd lost her heart forever, she knew now.

She sat quietly waiting for Pete to come to her, knowing that he would, as she knew that she lived and breathed. It had happened, the thing whose coming she'd sensed in advance. Not the fire, but love!

AND AS SHE waited, she thought back to that other night, a year and a half ago, when she'd sat waiting for word of her folks' safety. Outside, that night, too, a world gone berserk with wind and rain and the dance of lightning. Somewhere out in the storm-lashed distance, a frail little plane battled for its life.

Even now she could seem to see it happening, over a hundred miles away, towering mountain tops looming into stark relief against a suddenly crimsoned sky veiled by slanting rain.

There'd been just the three of them, her father, mother, and herself, no one else, not even any near relatives. She'd chosen to stay behind when her parents took off in her father's small plane for a second honeymoon on the twenty-fifth anniversary of their wedding.

"Three's too many for a honeymoon, Dad," she said. "I'll boss *The Star* while you're away."

For a year and a half now, she'd proved her ability to do it. Since starting high school, she'd dedicated every spare moment to learning the newspaper business. She'd worked through classified ads on up, her father putting her through merciless examinations. In preparedness, he'd said, for anything that might happen to him . . .

Like his small cabin plane battled down in a howling night to its end in a burst of consuming flame.

She, Willow, of William and Helen, was the last of the Houghs who had founded *The Star* years before The War Between The States.

Willow smiled her thanks when Frenchy himself brought up an ink-wet special extra and laid it on her desk. Good old silvery-haired Frenchy, her father's best friend, her second father, who never had married and who loved her like a daughter.

He shoved a finger down at the extra as he bit into a square of tobacco. "Four column spread, Red. By-lined. Like that guy Pete?"

"Frenchy, I hope to marry him!" She suddenly blurted out what was in her mind.

"Good. I was afraid that you'd sell out to Stu Chase."

"Sell out what?" She looked up blankly across her desk.

"Yourself. And us here on this sheet. For Stu's brand of love."

She grinned up at him, happy, Pete's kiss a promise. "What would you know about love, you a seventy-year-old bachelor?"

"Enough so I'll die a bachelor. Look, Red, Stu Chase mainly is interested in merging this town's only two rags, our *Star*, and his *Evening News*."

"It isn't his. It belongs to his father."

"It will belong to him one of these days, just as *The Star* does to you right now. What he wants is a complete newspaper monopoly in this city. You refused to sell for cash, so now he's offering you a phony love. Not too hard. You're easy on the eyes, Red."

"But he wouldn't marry me just to get hold of *The Star*."

"You kidding? Think I've been in the newspaper racket, man and boy, sixty-six years, sidewalk on up, for nothing? I'm telling you that Stu—"

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"Don't be alarmed, Frenchy. Stu Chase is definitely out. Because I know now what I want. Heaven with a fence around it. Five or six rooms, bungalow style. A yard for you know what, Frenchy. Trees, grass, flowers, a kitchen, and—Pete Donnely, with two n's and one l."

"Then go after him, but watch your step. You're the publisher. He's just a reporter, damn good, but still merely a reporter. You can't dodge that issue by making him executive editor in your place. Because he's got pride. Try it and see."

"I'm not aiming to try it. There's no favoritism on *The Star*. Except when Dad groomed me to take his place. And I wouldn't be here now if you'd taken over for me when he died."

"For how long? I'm seventy-one, and I would have quit my job long ago but for you buttering up to Stu Chase."

"I did not. He buttered up to me."

"Which is what I've tried to tell you. He's ambitious. You're social register. He's not, nor his old man, in spite of their money that Stu's great-granddaddy practically stole to start with back in the carpetbagging days, and that's what high society can't forget. To Stu, you're his ticket into homes he can't crash now. And with his hands on both papers, he can just about run this town. There in a nutshell, my dear, is why he acts gone on you. And it's why I've stuck around here. To do my utmost to keep you from making the bad mistake of marrying him."

"Well, I've no intention of marrying him, so calm yourself. I won't let Stu have *The Star* now any more than I would sell it to him or to the syndicates who bid plenty for it after Dad died. That's a promise, Frenchy, but you'll still have to take over this desk. Because I intend to marry Pete and keep house for him. Unless—" a cold, stark fear gripped at her heart, "—unless he already has a wife."

"He hasn't, not even a steady girl. That I know."

For a long time after Frenchy abruptly turned and left the room, she sat staring into space. Never yet had she caught the silvery-haired, tobacco-chewing old man making a statement he couldn't prove. Which meant, as her heart had told her, that Pete was free to love her.

She smiled dreamily, ready now for the first time in her life to believe in the reality of love at first sight. And Pete's kiss, still seemingly alive on her lips, had told her that it had happened to him as it had to her.

But Frenchy was wrong about Stu Chase. Stu loved her. Of that she was sure, or she never would have even considered marrying him. Frenchy was right in that the most exclusive social circles refused to forget about Stu's ancestor being a hated carpetbagger. But it hadn't made any difference with her, and Stu wasn't a bit interested in crashing high society. Of that she felt positive. Neither had he proposed marriage to her simply to get control of *The Star*. The idea was just too ridiculous to be considered. Stu merely had suggested, and rightly enough, that the two papers could be merged and put out from a single plant at a lower cost of publication. She'd promptly vetoed the thought.

"Too many *Star* people would lose their jobs, Stu."

"But you will let someone else take over your desk? What kind of a marriage would it be with me at my office daytimes, and you working nights?"

"Lousy."

"Then you will quit work?"

"Yes, Stu. *If* I marry you."

REMINDED THAT SHE still was holding down a job, Willow turned to the battered old typewriter at the end of her desk, and forced her mind into the task of writing the next day's editorials.

When she at last leaned back in her chair, one more still to go, the sky was graying outside wide open windows that

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she'd completely forgotten to close. But the rain had stopped now, a cool, moist wind blowing in across blackened carpets.

Where was Pete Donnely?

Hadn't her kiss meant anything to him after all?

She fed a fresh sheet of paper into her typewriter, and tried to close her heart against that new fear by concentrating, with eyes shut, upon her final editorial.

"So *you're* the big boss."

Pete's voice, scornfully curt, jerked her erect in her chair.

He threw a final edition down on her desk. "You talked about everybody on this sheet knowing everyone else, and you let me think you merely a secretary. You preached to me about teamwork, then you by-lined me across a four-column spread. You had two other men covering that fire, and how will they feel, with me new here?"

"Pete—"

"Don't 'Pete' me in that tone of voice. Don't look at me that way. I saw you and lost my head tonight. Let it go at that."

She stiffened. "Because I *am* the boss?"

"Think I was trading a kiss for a by-line?"

"Does it matter what I thought?" she said wearily.

"When I kissed you—yes. Now—no."

She looked up across her desk at him, at his soot-grinned face and tight-lipped mouth still carminely smudged by her lipstick. She looked at him with bared heart in her eyes. "Pete, I'm sorry about the by-line. I just didn't stop to think of anything except wanting you to get credit for what you did. Pete, please, *must* it make a difference between us simply because I'm not merely a secretary?"

"Enough so that I'm quitting this job as of now."

His eyes, cold and hard, told her that there was no hope for her. But still she tried to fight. "Frenchy told me that you're a drifter, but I didn't think that you'd let a woman frighten you away from here."

"Let me tell you something." Hands at her desktop, he leaned nearer, voice low and tense. "Ever since I got out of the Army, I've bummed around, yes. But in search of just the right, small town paper that I could buy and call my own. That, and just the right girl, one willing to work shoulder to shoulder with me to make my dreams come true."

He coldly eyed her. "Why don't you laugh? A guy like me . . . dreaming . . . being that much of a dope. But I did. And tonight, here and on the way to the fire, you laughing and thumbing that siren, and caring nothing about getting rain soaked, I thought that at long last I'd found her. I made a mistake, that's all."

SOMEHOW SHE WAS on her feet, numbly aware that they still were soaking wet, an inconsequential detail crowding into her mind when her life's happiness was being ruthlessly taken away from her. She faced him across the width of her desk.

"Apparently I made a mistake, too," she said out of her pride. "A bad mistake. Because *I've* been dope enough to dream. Tonight I thought . . . but why go into that? Quit this job if you want to. It's all right with me. Or stay, just as you choose. Rest assured that I won't pursue you. I'm not in the habit of running after men. But, if you do stay, I'll by-line your stuff when I think that you deserve it, and whether or not you like it. And another thing, stop using that red light and siren on your car until I can get you a police permit."

"I don't want it," he said contemptuously, straightening.

"Then I don't want you on this paper. We work with the police and fire departments, not in defiance of them. That's all, Pete. Goodnight."

She stood stiff and tense, battling back a storm of hot tears, waiting for him to go.

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"Well, is there anything else on your mind?"

He asked dangerously, "Meaning that I'm fired?"

With her knees threatening to give way at any moment, she managed to sit down, very deliberately. She turned to her typewriter. "Call it anything you like," she said tonelessly. "But," she added sharply, goaded by hurt, "if you decide to remain on my payroll, you'll take orders from me whenever I choose to give you an assignment."

"I've no objections, Miss Hough, to taking orders from anyone in authority who is old and experienced enough to know the newspaper business."

She choked back a caustic retort. He'd neatly put her on the defensive. But most certainly she wasn't going to recite to him the list of qualifications that enabled her, at her age, to head a big city daily.

She didn't look up from her typewriter until she heard him leave. And then only to be sure that he actually was gone.

Then with her head down on arms crossed on her desk, her hair a damp curtain against her cheeks, she gave way to pent-up tears.

"If I never see Pete Donnely again," she thought bitterly, driving her Lincoln convertible into the red-gold of the sunrise on her way home to bed, "it will be much too soon!"

But even in the twilight of her room, shuttered against the sunshine outside, and as she tried to sleep, Pete was there behind her closed eyelids, stark fright in his voice. "Don't ever scare me again like that. You could have been killed!"

She still could feel his wet lips claiming her as his for life.

STU CHASE was waiting for her at their customary table in a rear, secluded corner of the Chalfonte cocktail lounge. And as he rose to his feet, she found herself comparing him, as if meeting him for the first time, with Pete Donnely.

Blond he was, with intriguingly soft brown eyes. Not as tall as Pete, nor as bronzed, but fully as good looking. In a smooth, debonair sort of way. Not rugged like Pete. Despite the consistent refusal of the town's high society to recognize him, Stu possessed exquisite manners as well as a fortune. And she had known him long enough to realize that he could have had his choice of plenty of charming girls, none of whom would have hesitated to accept him if given the chance.

Yet he'd chosen her, Willow Hough, who'd kept him dangling while she made up her mind.

Did he want her because of her social position and because she had inherited The Star?

No, Frenchy was wrong about that. Stu really loved her.

Stinging resentment at the unfairness of Pete's contemptuous insinuation that she was neither old enough or experienced enough to know the newspaper game made her unusually nice to Stu.

He gratefully squeezed her hand. "It's a good sign. That you've finally decided in my favor. You have, haven't you, Willow?"

She looked down at her martini. "I've kept you waiting long enough, haven't I?"

"A woman's prerogative. But let's not overdo it. Is it—yes?"

Why not? Why let one kiss, even a kiss so overwhelming as Pete's, bring hurt into Stu's life as well as into her own? Stu loved her. Pete doubtless kissed every girl he met. And when she'd so shamelessly bared her heart to him in her eyes, he'd hastily let her down with the excuse that she wasn't just a secretary as she'd let him believe.

Well, it was all right with her. Because she would marry Stu and force herself to forget that savagely sweet moment in a night of rain and wind and

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flame. She would be the sort of a wife Stu wanted.

"Well, darling," Stu prompted gently, "is it yes . . . or yes?"

"I guess . . . yes," she said faintly.

He pulled her into his arms.

"Please, not here where people can see us!" she begged hastily.

"Who's looking?"

She was too embarrassed to notice. But she would only attract greater attention by resisting. She yielded.

The kiss left her cold, unstirred.

But, after all, what difference did it make? Love, a lasting love, wasn't born of a single flaming kiss that had promised paradise only to pay off in hurt. Love, such as her parents had known, was based on mutual understanding and trust.

Stu was her kind of people, and her equal in the newspaper business, not a wolfish subordinate. With Stu she could have the sort of life to which she was accustomed. With Stu she could have everything in the whole wide world that she wanted, within reason of course, except a chance to prove to Pete Donnely that she was enough a newspaper woman to work shoulder to shoulder with him to help him make his dreams come true.

But Pete had made it very plain that he didn't want her help.

She gulped down her martini and opened her compact to repair her kiss-smudged mouth.

Stu signaled a waiter. "Champagne cocktails, please."

To her he added, "It isn't every day that I get engaged. My dear, lend me a hand."

He lifted her left. Willow laid her compact down on the table. A small ivory case lined with green velvet stood there open. Stu slid a ring down on her unresisting finger. He said, "It's a Tiffany, 1898 style solitaire. The latest fashion revival. Exchange it if you don't like it."

"It's lovely." But her eyes blurred.

"Calls for a celebration tonight."

"Can't. I've got to work." She reached for her purse and gloves.

"But you promised to quit."

"When and *if* I marry you."

He lit a cigarette. "Look, you're now wearing my ring."

"I know." She felt no joy of it. "Just don't shove me. I'll quit my job when I'm ready, not before."

She saw his fingers tense until his cigarette was crushed flat. But he spoke good naturedly as the champagne cocktails arrived. "Well, at least I've won the first round. We're engaged, aren't we?"

"Engaged?" she echoed blankly. "Why, of course. What else?"

THE CHAMPAGNE MADE the ache in her heart easier to bear. She had dinner with Stu, and escaped to the office, Pete nowhere in sight in the city room. She hung up her suit jacket. Black like her mood when she'd dressed that afternoon. Like her mood now, the champagne glow gone.

Frenchy phoned up from the floor below. "Better let me write the editorials until you can put your mind to it again. Couldn't use what you did last night. Hash, pure hash."

"I'm not surprised." Her fingers tightened about the phone. "Frenchy, has Pete quit his job here?"

"He quit, but I talked him into changing his mind."

"Oh!" She felt mingled relief and resentment. "How?"

"By assuring him that he need not take orders from you."

"I see," she flared. "Well, in that case, you not only can do the editorials, but you can take over all the rest of my job until further notice. Goodnight!" She savagely cradled the phone, but only to lift it again to call Stu, getting him at his club.

"This is me, Willow. I've changed my mind. Let's celebrate after all. Pick me

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up in an hour or so at my apartment."

So long as Pete Donnely remained on *The Star,* she'd stay away!

Frenchy came, silver-haired and grim-faced, from the direction of the stairs as she silently fumed at the button of an unresponsive elevator. "Let's see your hands, Red."

She shoved them out toward him. Violently.

He jerked off her left glove. "I thought so. Stu Chase's ring?"

She eyed him dangerously. "Who tipped you off?"

"We've a cafe society gossip columnist, you know."

"Snoop, you mean!" she flared. "Nedra Forsythe, at the Chalfonte Lounge this afternoon. Well, give her my love, and tell her that she'll be seeing me out and around again tonight. With the same man!"

She seethed all the way home in her Lincoln convertible. What business was it of Frenchy's whom she married just so long as *The Star* retained its individuality and its staff held their jobs? Wasn't it enough that she'd promised not to let Stu gain control of the sheet?

Most certainly Frenchy hadn't backed her up when he'd told Pete that he needn't take orders from her.

And she most certainly would not give Pete or Frenchy or anyone else the pleasure of making an issue of it. While Pete Donnely remained with *The Star,* its owner and executive editor would date Stu Chase!

Black still suited her mood. She chose black lace floated on taffeta, dramatic with her red hair banked high, restored to perfection by Louellen, her highly-efficient, highly-paid maid. The bodice was boned and strapless and brought out the old-ivory lustre of her slim shoulders. She mounted sandals with two-inch platforms and six-inch heels, goaded by a burning need to feel desirably feminine. She painted her mouth a red almost black.

Stu seemed to sense her restlessness, and took her from place to place without any asking. "To show you off as mine," he said.

It suited her perfectly. Let Nedra Forsythe see her again with Stu. Let Pete Donnely read all about it in Nedra's column, and know that his kiss hadn't blighted Willow Hough's young life!

AT THE PLANTATION, as Stu escorted her to the small dance floor, Willow caught just a passing glimpse, between milling people, of Nedra's face. Quite aware that Nedra would see her sooner or later, Willow went into Stu's arms with lowered lashes, face registering beatific dreams, her left hand at his shoulder, so Nedra could get a good look at her ring.

But when Stu returned her to their table, she gasped at the sight of two extra chairs there, nonchalantly occupied by Nedra in figure-accenting green satin, and the great, one and only Pete Donnely looking perfectly at ease and at home in dinner clothes.

"How nice!" she greeted them with cold fury. She introduced the two men. "Stu, this is *The Star's* latest acquisition, a timid wolf who asks to be excused when a female shows interests in his advances. Pete Donnely, with two N's and one L. *Mr.* Donnely, this is Stuart Chase of *The News,* and my fiancé."

Stu seated her as if she were royalty, bent his blond head low, and kissed her full on her dark-red mouth. For that she loved him.

She looked frostily at Pete as he regained his own chair. "You're here, I presume, on assignment for *The Star*?"

"To help my charming companion glean gossip for her column," he said unperturbed.

Willow retorted acidly, "Since when did Nedra need help?"

"Since the minute I first laid eyes on

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Pete," Nedra purred with glowing eyes.

Stu signaled his waiter. "Champagne cocktails all around." He added, looking at Pete, "I've heard tell that you're a good newspaper man. I can use you. This still is off the record, but Willow and I are planning to merge our two papers when we're married."

"We are not!" Willow said flatly.

Stu swung a surprised glance her way. "But, my dear, you said—"

"That I'd give up my job on *The Star* to someone else. But only when and *if* I marry you. I've not yet set the date, and I won't until it's clearly understood between us that *I* continue to control *The Star* and to run it as I please."

Pete said softly, "Atta girl!"

She glared at him. "When I want *your* reactions, I'll ask for them."

She pushed back her chair, unable to endure the sight of Pete and his blonde looking at each other like a pair of adolescents in the throes of puppy love. "Stuffy here, don't you think, Stu? Take me home, please."

He agreed with surprising readiness which was explained when in his car he protested, "You'll find your time fully occupied by being my wife. I don't want you messing around day or night with a newspaper. Besides, as I've already mentioned, our two sheets merged can be put out from a single plant, thus eliminating costly duplication of machinery, building, and personnel, and at a considerable reduction in overhead. So—"

"There'll be no merger," she said firmly.

He shrugged. "Then suppose I say that there'll be no wedding?"

"Suits me." She stripped off her glove and his ring.

He dropped the ring into his coat pocket, and grinned with a sudden return of normal good humor. "I seem to have lost the second round, but I think you'll see things my way in the end."

She didn't dispute the point. But his insistence that they merge the two papers lent weight to Frenchy's assertion that Stu wanted her because she owned *The Star*. Perhaps Frenchy was right, too, about the society angle. She didn't care one way or the other. Not while Pete Donnely doubtless still sat at a table back there in the Plantation, most likely holding hands now with Nedra.

Stu was angry with her despite his nice pretense at good humor, she knew, when he failed to even try to kiss her good night. Probably she was displaying a remarkable lack of intelligence by antagonizing him.

Because he would make a good husband so long as she protected herself. Which she could do by retaining control of *The Star* while letting him run it for her. So long as he remained her husband, high society would receive him. Thus he would gain his objectives, granted that Frenchy was right, and she could show Pete that he'd not broken a certain redhead's heart with merely one flaming kiss.

Pete, thank goodness, didn't know that the owner and executive editor of *The Star*, was crying herself to sleep because of him.

THE FINAL EDITION of *The Star*, next morning carried as front page lead, "Willow Hough Denies Intent To Merge Star and News."

The story was by-lined, "Pete Donnely."

Willow tossed the paper aside and got Frenchy on the phone at his home. "From now on," she said savagely, "you will print no more copy turned in by Pete Donnely, until I okay it."

"But look, Red, he merely did what I told him to. Naturally we're all worried about our jobs, you wearing Stu Chase's ring, so when Nedra asked me for Pete's help—"

"You had a brainstorm, didn't you? Well, as of tonight, *I'm* running *The Star*.

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You'll take your orders from me, understand?"

She showered, dressed in sweater and plaid skirt, and invaded the kitchen. Louellen said apologetically, "Wasn't expecting you up this early, Miss Willow. I'll have your breakfast ready in a jiffy."

Willow sank down at the kitchen table. "Louellen," she said impulsively, "If one man wanted you mostly for what you've got, and another man dropped you flat on your face simply because you've got what you've got, what would you do?"

"Seeing as how you put it that way, Miss Willow," said the understanding old Louellen, "I'd say, get rid of what you've got."

"It's a thought."

Willow drove her Lincoln for miles through the country, but came home at last, to exactly where she'd started. She couldn't get rid of *The Star*, even if it might make a difference with Pete. Because she'd promised Frenchy that she never would sell out.

Stu phoned just as she finished changing into a gray tweed suit and crisp white blouse. "Meet me at the Chalfonte this afternoon as usual?"

"No. Stu, I've made up my mind at last. I'm not in love with you, I'll never be in love with you. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

And Pete Donnely was a drifter, from one job to another—a drifter who left broken hearts behind him in every town where he worked, she thought bitterly as she drove her Lincoln downtown. *The minute a girl let him know that she wanted him, he dropped her.*

Her face flamed at the memory of what an easy conquest she'd been. No wonder he'd so soon lost interest in her. No wonder that he'd so avidly seized upon the excuse that she was the big boss, not just a mere secretary. And she'd thought it was his pride coming between them.

His car, his '39 Olds, minus a top, was parked in front of *The Star* as she made a left turn across the street to head into the alley leading back to the paper's parking garage.

Pete Donnely, she noticed, tensing all over, was in his car. Nedra Forsythe was just getting out, pausing, leaning forward, slipping her arms around his neck.

Willow had to drag her eyes away from them or ruin a fender by missing the alley between two very substantial buildings. But one last, fleeting glance told her that Nedra was experiencing a Donnely-style, flame-kindling kiss. Willow felt sorry for Nedra.

One more scalp for Casanova Donnely.

SHE MECHANICALLY parked her Lincoln and rode up in the elevator to her office. Unable to stay away, she went to a window and looked down into the street. Pete, his Olds, and Nedra were gone from sight.

She dropped down behind her desk, and got Frenchy on the phone. "Did you actually think that by sending Pete Donnely out on a nightspot assignment with Nedra, that you'd make me jealous enough to say what I did?"

"It worked, didn't it? And quicker, I'll admit, than I expected."

"And, I suppose, Pete didn't merely walk in here and strike you for a job. You arranged it, hoping that I would fall for him?"

"Bulls-eye, Red, but don't get sore. Again it happened quicker than I looked for."

"Frenchy—!"

"Wait. You asked me what I know about love. Well, Pete's father married the only woman I ever wanted, then got himself drowned on a fishing trip. So I've sort of looked out for Pete. Like he was my own son. That's how I knew where to contact him."

"I see. You told him to make love to me."

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"Red, so help me—"

"It's all right. Don't get excited. You win. Because I'm not marrying Stu Chase. Pete put it across. No merger contemplated." Willow dropped her phone into its cradle.

She stared down at her desk. She was giving orders now. She'd told Frenchy so. He ought to be able to remember it. She reached for her phone, and called the city desk. "Send Pete Donnely up here at once."

She put her lipstick on with shaking fingers, then sat back and waited.

Her phone buzzed metallically. Pete's voice said lazily, "What do you want?"

"You— up here. Quickly."

"For what? You can tell me over the phone."

"All right, I will," she blazed. "I have an assignment for you. You'll call for me at my apartment in an hour from now. You're taking me out tonight as you did Nedra Forsythe last night."

"Oh, no I'm not." The line clicked and was empty.

He'd hung up on her!

She should have known that he would refuse.

Her redheaded scalp already hung at his belt.

She savagely reached for her phone and called the city desk. "Get Pete Donnely up here—now!"

"I'm sorry, Red, but—"

She got Frenchy on the wire. "Where's Pete Donnely?"

"What do you want from him?"

"That's my business. Where is he?"

"Tell me what you want him for."

"All right, I'm going to fire him."

"You can't."

"And why, pray tell?" she asked dangerously. "*I'm* giving orders here now."

"Because he just handed me his resignation."

Two bad weeks followed. Willow looked into her mirror and knew that she was losing weight. She couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, couldn't pin her mind down to work. Frenchy was running *The Star*.

Stu phoned daily. "The Chalfonte—tonight?"

"No!"

Louellen said defiantly, "Get rid of what you've got."

Willow eyed her smoulderingly. "How? I've promised not to sell."

"Give it away, Miss Willow."

"You've got something there."

WILLOW HOUGH STARED down unseeingly at a first-run copy of *The Springdale Herald*. It was a year now, nearly, since she'd made a present of *The Star* to its employees, to be run as a co-operative enterprise. It was almost a year since she'd given up the smart, duplex apartment she'd kept after losing her parents. Very nearly a year ago, she'd turned her personal possessions into cash, even her jewelry and her Lincoln convertible—cash with which to buy, at a sheriff's sale, a whistle-stop weekly.

With the ever faithful Louellen, she was living in four rooms above a chain store.

Louellen said, "You got to pray, Miss Willow."

"Think I'm not?"

For almost a year now, she'd advertised *The Springdale Herald* for sale. She'd refused cash offers greater than her investment.

"So *you're* the boss here?"

She looked up across her desk, somehow able to keep gladness from her eyes. "What do you want?"

Pete Donnely said, "You've advertised this sheet for sale?"

"You're able to read, aren't you?"

"But why sell? You're making money. I've checked. This rag is in the black."

"Thanks. Apparently I'm old enough and experienced enough to—"

"All right, I was wrong about you. But

(Continued on page 96)

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Your Pen Personality

By Mary Frances

Here is a special and exciting feature, written exclusively for our NEW LOVE readers, by the famous Mary Frances, who will send you a personal analysis of your handwriting. Why not take advantage of this offer today? Simply write to her in care of NEW LOVE MAGAZINE, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Send a self-addressed envelope with ten cents, and clip the coupon on page 58.

DOES YOUR HANDWRITING climb up the right-hand side of the paper when you write, so that you have space left over on the bottom? You're ambitious, optimistic, cheerful, like Dinah Shore whose signature definitely "climbs", reflecting her over-active ambitions.

Does your writing have points on top of the small letters instead of curved portions? Do the "N's" have sharp tops; the other letters a tip instead of a peak? You and Dinah Shore have business insight, usually know values.

Or does your writing have each letter properly joined to its predecessor a-la-Dinah? Logic is your middle name. (Those who separate their letters throughout are intuitive.)

Does your writing have the same degree of slant that Dinah's does? Then you too

are affectionate and inclined to express your feelings.

Your pen reveals your personality just as it does for the stars. Dinah's pen indicates a girl who would force herself to make good no matter what profession she might choose. Although Eddie Cantor officially gave her a start as a youthful vocalist, she has not allowed herself to rest on those laurels. Personality, plugging and perseverance have kept this young lady on top of the ladder of her chosen career.

FROM THE MAILBAG

Dear Mary Frances:

I'm in a quandary for my boyfriend promised his mother, on her deathbed, that he would never marry . . . that he would support his two sisters. He was 20 then, is 29 now. We want to marry but he has his promise. One sister is an invalid and probably will never marry either. The other has a husband.

We've been going together for two years and this is the first time I heard of his promise. He is heartbroken and so am I. What do you think we should do?

Bernice M.

Most of the clergymen to whom I have spoken about similar cases agree that a promise given under such circumstances is not binding, as the reason for the promise is to ease a dying person's mind. They also seem to feel that one who is leaving this world has no right to control the activities of others remaining here. I think you should consider their learned

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opinions in this and take it up with your own spiritual counselor.

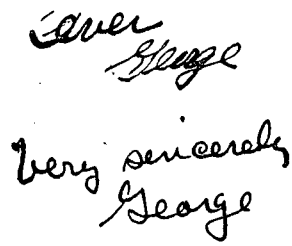
Obviously the boy's mother was distressed about her daughters, especially the sick one. It may have preyed on her mind to such an extent she saw no other way out but that unfair promise. We cannot judge her. We know that she was ill, that she did the best she could. The boy did right to ease her mind. He would, I believe, be doing wrong to live an unnatural life.

Your handwriting shows much intelligence, so I think you can make him see the way.

Dear Mary Frances:
I live in Washington, D. C. where the ratio of women to men is 8 to 1. It is interesting to read that figure when you live elsewhere—but you just try living through that! I'm 22 and don't want to think in terms of sororities, women's clubs and eventually old ladies homes.
From my handwriting, do you think I have enough gumption to make good elsewhere, away from the family? (You may get several questions like this as our department recently released those figures.)
Mary L.

Yes, you have gumption but you also have procrastination, so conquer the latter to make way for the first. Yes, I have received similar letters and my reply has been the same: "Go West Young Lady, or Go North." Men abound in exactly the opposite figures in other sections of the country.

Dear Mary Frances:
If two sisters love one boy and he won't give us any clue as to which of us he loves, just how do we find out? I am enclosing his signature to me and to my sister. They both look a bit different to me. He has two definitely opposite styles.
Frances H.



The boy likes you—at least his handwriting tells me so. He is a shy young man who probably finds it very difficult to express himself. The two different styles give the clue. The upright style he uses when postcarding your sister shows that he has his emotions under rather good control. The extreme rightward slant he uses when writing you, tells me that he has much affection for you.

Now that you know this you might as well try to get him alone for a few minutes to give him a chance to pop the important question. You may have to put the words right into his mouth—many girls do—but he'll never know that.

Dear Miss Frances:
How do we go about getting on the radio show "Bride & Groom?" My fiancée and I would like to be married there but have no idea what to do.
Frank L.

Write "Bride & Groom," c/o the sta-

(Continued on page 97)

Send this coupon and a sample of handwriting with 10c and a stamped, self-addressed envelope to:

Mary Frances, c/o New Love Magazine **January, 1949**
205 East 42nd Street
New York 17, N. Y.

NAME .....

STREET ADDRESS.....

CITY..... **STATE**.....

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From Santa— With Love

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A dark, handsome stranger played Santa Claus, and Lynne found love in his pack of good cheer.

By FRANCES YOULIN McHUGH

TAKING HER SMALL niece to see Santa Claus was one of the things that made Christmas for Lynne. They talked about it for months and now at last they were here at Tracy's in the line leading to the throne where Santa Claus sat.

Golden-haired Barbara, aged six, clung to Lynne's hand. "What shall I ask him?" she inquired eagerly, her blue eyes wide and sparkling with excitement.

Lynne smiled down at her. The perspiration stood out on her forehead in wet beads and her face was a sort of petunia pink. "Just tell him what you'd like for Christmas," she said, pushing her beaver

His eyes met hers and she stopped short. Where had she seen him before?

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coat back away from her warm shoulders.

Step by step they progressed toward Santa Claus. Lynne thought: *I wish it were as simple as that. I'd ask him to make Bill want to get married before he goes to the Coast on his new job.*

Three steps more. She could see the man's face now. That is, she could see a small part of it above the false white whiskers.

Two steps more and she was near enough to see his eyes. They were large and blue. A very bright blue. And as they met hers over the heads of the people in front of her, they didn't look like the eyes of a man as old as Santa Claus ought to be. In fact, they looked very young and a bit too eager as they scanned her oval face framed in thick, dark hair.

She wasn't self-conscious but she felt her face changing from a petunia pink to a holly red.

Another step. And another. Then they were there, standing before Santa Claus. She pushed Barbara up close to him. "There you are, dear. Now tell Santa Claus what you want for Christmas."

Barbara held back and looked up at her appealingly. "You tell him, Auntie Lynne," she pleaded.

Lynne smiled. "Oh, now you're not going to be bashful after waiting such a long, long time to see Santa Claus, are you?"

"Of course she isn't," Santa said kindly. "What's your name, little girl? Come up here and tell me what you want for Christmas so I'll know what to put in my pack on Christmas Eve."

His voice was the kind that inspires confidence, and Barbara stepped closer to him. "My name's Barbara," she told him.

He held out a hand to her and surprisingly she took hold of it. As she did so, Lynne couldn't help noticing that the man's hand was a young hand with firm flesh. It was a strong hand. The kind of a hand a girl of any age would be glad to hold on to.

But she was being perfectly ridiculous. The man was probably just a straggler who'd taken the Santa Claus job so he could have a few extra cups of coffee over the holidays. Girls didn't cling to that kind of a man. They clung to men like Bill, who were big and strong and purposeful. Men who got good jobs as soon as they were out of college and who were going on to better jobs—the way Bill was.

SANTA CLAUS WAS talking to Barbara, and so that she wouldn't seem to be listening, Lynne gazed around the crowded floor. The place was milling with people, and the noise of mechanical toys was deafening. She turned her attention back to Barbara just as the child was saying, "I want a new doll and a fire engine and a full black skirt that's very long and swishy, like the one Auntie Lynne wears when she goes dancing with Bill."

Santa Claus smiled behind the false white beard and his blue eyes met Lynne's big brown ones. She felt herself smiling in return. "Come now, Barbara," she said hastily. "You mustn't take any more of Santa's time. He has other little girls and boys to talk to."

"But not until after lunch," Santa declared.

Lynne looked around and saw there was no one behind them. A rope had been put across the entrance to the aisle. The discovery embarrassed her. She hadn't expected to be left there alone with the man —whoever he was.

Her face must have revealed how she felt because he added, "It's all right. Surely my reputation down the years has qualified me as a safe companion for both little and big girls." He was chuckling into his beard.

Darn him! Pulling at Barbara's arm she said, "Come, Barbara!"

"Just a minute," Santa said. "Hadn't I better know your last name and your address so I can find you Christmas Eve?"

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Hastily Lynne said, "That isn't necessary. You're much too smart to have to know names and addresses."

But she hadn't spoken quickly enough. Barbara spoke up: "My name is Barbara Sheridan and I live at . . ." As Lynne dragged her along she yelled the address on East Seventy-first Street near the park. "And don't forget!" was her parting shout.

"I shan't. I'll be there. With everything!" Santa called after her.

Going down in the elevator Lynne said crossly, "You shouldn't have told him your name and address. And you shouldn't have said that about—the dress I wear when I go out with Bill."

"But why not? Isn't that why you took me to see him? So I could tell him what I want? And how's he going to know where he should bring the things if I don't tell him?"

"He's found you every other year, hasn't he?"

"Y—yes." Barbara looked solemn.

For fear that she'd spoiled her fun, Lynne added quickly, "Well, never mind. Would you like to have lunch at some place where you can get a great big dish of ice cream?"

Barbara jumped up and down and her eyes sparkled. "Oh, yes! Can we, Auntie Lynne?"

During lunch Barbara watched her aunt closely. Then, apropos of nothing, she asked, "Auntie Lynne, why aren't you married?"

Lynne smiled. "Why, I don't know. I guess maybe I've been too busy to think about it."

"You mean busy with your jewelry business?"

"Yes."

"But you're old enough to get married, aren't you?"

"Oh yes. I'm old enough."

"How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-three."

Barbara took a sip of water. "Don't you like Bill enough to marry him?" she continued.

"Yes, I like Bill," Lynne admitted honestly.

"I don't like Bill." Barbara kicked her feet back and forth and Lynne said goodbye to a nice pair of nylons.

"Why don't you like Bill?" Lynne inquired.

Barbara kicked her feet harder. "I don't know. I just don't."

"Keep your feet still," Lynne told her sharply.

Barbara stopped swinging her feet. "Why don't you marry Bill?" she asked.

"Hush!" Lynne noticed the smiling women at nearby tables.

Why didn't she marry Bill? Because he hadn't asked her—that was why. He'd taken her out for over a year and made love to her, but he'd never asked her to

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marry him. Now he was going to California to open a new office for his advertising agency, and she'd probably never see him again after tomorrow.

Barbara was poking disinterestedly at her creamed chicken and spinach. "How old is Bill?" she asked.

"He's twenty-six."

"You're almost as old as my mother."

"That's right. Your mother was married very young."

Barbara began kicking her feet again. "Auntie Lynne, are you an old maid?"

Fortunately the waitress came to take their order for dessert and Barbara's attention was diverted.

AFTER LUNCH SHE got the child home and turned her over to her mother. She was exhausted, but she still had Deborah's cocktail party to go through. It was a sort of farewell party for Bill. He was flying to the Coast tomorrow to spend Christmas with his family who were there for the winter.

She tried to decide what to wear to the cocktail party. Something that Bill would like. Their tastes in clothes didn't always coincide, but they both liked the long black skirt Barbara had mentioned to Santa Claus. She decided to wear that. And with it a white jacket with gold threads running through it.

Bill was late. It was nearly six-thirty when he phoned up from the lobby that he had a cab waiting. She threw a mink jacket around her shoulders and hurried down to meet him.

"Hiya, honey bunch," Bill greeted her.

"Greetings," she said casually, but her heart was beating wildly as she stepped into the cab.

He slipped his arm around hers, when the cab was under way, capturing her hand in his. "Going to miss me when I'm gone?" he asked.

Her wildly beating heart quavered at the thought of his leaving but she managed a smile. He was big and blond with eyes more green than blue. Green like the sea, she always thought every time she looked into them. And as restless and deep. She was never quite sure what Bill was thinking about. But that made it more interesting.

"Of course I'm going to miss you," she assured him and let him kiss her. From now on each kiss would be more precious than gold. "I wish you weren't going," she said.

Bill held her close. "In a way I wish I weren't," he declared. "I'll miss you, Lynne."

She wanted to say, *You could take me with you.* But that suggestion should come from him. And he didn't make it. What he did say was, "Maybe some day I'll come back for you."

Even that tiny crumb of hope set her heart soaring. "I'll be waiting, Bill," she said gently.

The cab stopped in front of Deborah Carter's Sutton Place apartment. Going up in the elevator they heard shrill laughter. "Sounds as if some of them had a headstart on us," Bill said.

She put a hand on his arm. "Bill, don't drink too much, will you? We want to have all day tomorrow—unspoiled—and start the day early."

"Don't worry," he told her. "We'll have our day tomorrow."

Instantly she was sorry she'd spoken about his drinking.

AS THEY ENTERED the apartment wild peals of laughter came from a group around a handsome young man. "I think that's *hysterical*!" a girl squealed. "It's priceless. Perfectly *priceless*!" a man said and laughed loudly.

"Tell it to Bill," Deborah said, coming to greet them. "Jud Randall did the most *hysterical* thing the other day," she explained. "But he'll have to tell it himself. No one else could do it justice."

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A maid took their wraps and Deborah led them toward the group. "But I guess you've never met Jud," she said. "He's a sort of thirty-second cousin. We live right in the same city but I only see him once every ten years or so."

Did Lynne imagine it, or did the young man give Deborah a warning look?

"I've never heard you mention him," Lynne said.

Over a sequinned shoulder Deborah confessed, "I never *do* talk of him, because the last time I saw him he was just a teen-age brat. But at twenty-six he's really worth a girl's time."

Getting her first good look Lynne had to admit he *was*—quite wonderful. He wasn't very tall, although he topped her five-foot-seven. His features might have been chiseled by a Greek sculptor. His hair was dark brown and slightly wavy and his eyes . . .

His eyes met hers and she stopped short. She'd seen those eyes before. And recently. They were the kind of eyes you didn't forget easily. But where had she seen them? Quickly her brain searched for the answer. But the one it presented for her approval was too ridiculous to even consider.

His eyes still held hers and in them was recognition and—amusement. Those eyes had seen *her* before—and *they* remembered *where*. And quite evidently they thought it very amusing.

Her cheeks warmed as Deborah said, "Lynne, I want you to meet my cousin, Judson Randall, Jud, this is Lynne Sheridan. She designs jewelry. You know, that heavy copper and silver stuff that looks so arty."

Politely Lynne smiled and held out her hand and Jud Randall grasped it. It was then she knew where she'd seen those eyes —*and* that hand. They belonged to Santa Claus!

But that was fantastic!

The man kept hold of her hand and she could feel herself freezing to a solid lump of ice. The thing that had been her heart up to that moment suddenly became a searing ball of fire.

"And behind Lynne," Deborah was saying, "is Bill Harlow. God's gift to the advertising business—and, I might add—to *women,* Bill, Judson Randall. Jud messes around with paints. I'm not quite sure what he does with them."

Bill held out his hand to Jud and Jud had to release Lynne's. While Bill was saying, "I know his work, it's darn good," Lynne had a chance to pull herself together.

Deborah said, "Tell them about your job the other day, Jud. They'll love it."

Involuntarily Lynne's eyes met Jud's again. She saw a strange look come into his. For a moment he didn't answer Deborah. Then quietly he said, "Somehow I don't believe Miss Sheridan would find the story—amusing."

"Why, she'd *love* it!" Deborah cried.

But Jud was motioning to a white-coated waiter who was passing a tray of cocktails. Taking Lynne's arm he led her to a small table and two empty chairs near a window, where the waiter served them drinks.

GRATEFULLY LYNNE SANK into one of the chairs and Jud took the other. "I don't know why I acted so stupidly," she said. "But it was rather a shock to discover a fugitive from a Santa Claus suit at a Deborah's cocktail party."

He smiled and her heart stopped. "I know why you were—upset," he said.

Foolishly she asked, "Why?"

He took a swallow of his drink and set the glass down on the table. Leaning towards her he continued, "Because the moment we looked into each other's eyes this morning in Tracy's, we—fell in love."

Lynne jumped up. "Don't be silly!" she said crossly.

He stood up and took her arm. "Wait.

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Don't rush off like that. I want to talk to you."

She shook off his hand. "Well, I don't want to talk to *you*. I think you're impertinent and presuming and—and I want to find Bill."

She hurried away from him and found Bill having a quiet little tête-a-tête with Deborah in the small library to one side of the large living room. They were sitting on a rose satin love seat in front of a log fire, and Bill had an arm flung across the back of the seat. That arm wasn't *around* Deborah, but another inch would have done it.

"Bill," Lynne called, "I've been looking for you."

Bill and Deborah turned and Deborah said darkly, "This is probably the last chance I'll have to say good-bye to Bill."

Bill grinned. "The fuss you gals are making over my departure is sure flattering. I never realized I was so important to you."

"Didn't you?" Deborah asked, raising thin dark brows.

Lynne waited for Bill to join her, but he stayed where he was. "I'll be in in a minute," he said. "Run along and have fun."

She was being dismissed like a child, and for a moment she was too angry to move. Bill saw the storm warnings in her eyes and laughed. "Now don't go getting your Irish up," he said. "I'll join you in a minute."

Turning away she reentered the living room and instantly Jud was at her side. "I have a car downstairs," he said. "A spin through the Park would be fun."

As they sauntered across the crowded room her heartbeat changed its rhythm. First it jumped, then it quickened, slowed, quickened again. "Thanks, but I have an escort—remember? Bill Harlow?"

Jud smiled and took hold of her arm. "Oh yes. He's the fellow this party is for, isn't he?"

"The very same."

"Seems like a nice chap."

"He's all of that."

JUD LED HER to a French window that opened on a small iron balcony. Together they stood looking down at the river. "I don't want to be personal," he said, "but if *I* were fortunate enough to be your escort, I'd work at it harder."

A saucy little tug steamed beneath the bridge and tooted warningly to another boat coming in the opposite direction. Lynne felt as if it also was warning her to —beware. She turned and looked at him. "It's almost too much of a coincidence for you to be here this evening." It was her way of disregarding his remark about Bill's neglect.

He smiled. "It isn't coincidence. During my lunch hour today I phoned everybody I knew in town and asked them if they knew a Lynne Sheridan. The last one I called was Deborah. She said you were one of her best friends and wanted to know why I was interested. I told her I'd seen you and wanted to meet you, so she said you were coming here this afternoon and if I wanted to I could come. Naturally I wanted to come, but I warned her if she dared mention the fact that I'd called her I'd wring her neck."

Lynne couldn't think of anything to say and behind them the buzz of voices and laughter grew in noisy proportions. After a while she asked, "How did you happen to be down at Tracy's today?"—

He laughed. "That was just a joke. My dad has a friend who is a manager of something or other down there and their Santa Claus had to go to his grandmother's funeral, or something, today, so I said I'd pinch hit for him. I like kids, and I always thought it would be kind of fun to play Santa Claus to them."

"May I ask what you do when you're not pinch-hitting for Santa Claus and attending cocktail parties? That is, what

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do you do with those paints Deborah mentoned?"

"I'm a commercial artist," Jud replied. "I guess my best bid to fame at the present time is that poster of Santa Claus recommending the long green car for Christmas."

"Oh yes, I've seen it." How could she help it. It was on billboards all over town and in every magazine.

She found herself smiling. "You're sort of overdoing the Santa Claus angle, aren't you?" she asked.

"Maybe it's a good omen," was his reply. "Maybe I'll get what I want for Christmas this year?"

"Oh? What do you want?"

"You!"

She'd walked right into that one and could have hit herself for being such a dope.

Giving him a quick smile she said, "*I'm* not hanging on the Christmas tree. As a matter of fact I'm all wrapped up, with a card tagged, 'For Bill.' "

Then she saw Bill coming toward her with two drinks in his hand, and with a, "Good-bye, now," she walked toward him, leaving Jud alone by the window.

"Having fun?" Bill asked, handing her a glass.

"Great!" she said, taking the drink. By now she felt as if she needed one.

She didn't see Jud after that. He must have left soon after.

The party seemed to drag on and on. She and Bill had to be the last to leave and when they went, Deborah kissed Bill. "You don't mind, do you, Lynne?" she asked. "After all, this *was* a farewell party. And California is a long way off."

Lynne wouldn't have minded, but there were tears in Deborah's large dark eyes. It gave her a strange feeling. She never thought Deborah liked Bill. Deborah had always played the field—never centering her attentions on any one man.

WHEN THEY REACHED the street and Bill was hailing a taxi, Lynne noticed that he staggered a bit.

"Bill, did you have a lot to drink?" she asked anxiously.

Crossly he snapped, "Of course not! Don't start nagging, for goodness sake." A cab stopped for them and as he put her into it he said, "The Stork Club."

"Oh, but hadn't we better go home?" Lynne asked, knowing that if they went on to the Club he'd drink more.

Sinking back into his corner of the cab he said, "You mean go to your brother's?"

"That's where I mean when I say, home."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," he grumbled. "If we go there, we'll have to have that Barbara child crawling all over us and asking questions. I'm not up to it tonight. I want to have a little fun my last evening in New York."

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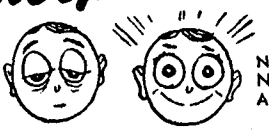

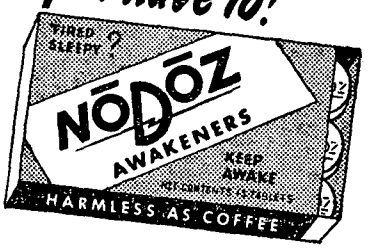

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Something in his tone of voice as he spoke of Barbara hit her wrong. "Don't you like Barbara?" she demanded.

"Oh, sure—sure," he said. "But tonight I just want *you*." He reached for her and pulled her into his arms and for a moment she let him hold her. Then suddenly she wanted to get away from him. "Please let me go," she begged and moved to the other side of the seat. But she didn't protest any more about going to the Club.

When they were seated at a wall table and Bill had ordered drinks and food, she said, "You mean this to be good-bye —for us, don't you?"

He moved close to her and leaned a heavy shoulder against hers. "Oh come now, don't turn on the sob stuff."

"But you do. I know you do." She should have had more pride, but time was running too short.

He didn't answer for a moment. Then he said, "I'm not sure, Lynne. I guess I love you. I must. We've been going together over a year, ever since I met you and Deborah at the Junior League dance. But—oh, I don't know how to explain it—somehow I don't feel quite ready for marriage yet."

It was as if a great gust of wind had blown her breath away. For a moment she couldn't speak. She just sat there quietly and her right hand turned and turned a glass of ice water until her fingers were chilled by it. Then she said, "I see."

He turned and took her hand. "No, you don't, Lynne. And I don't know how to make you." His eyes were troubled. "I love you, Lynne. But—well this afternoon when Deborah and I were sitting there before the fire—and when she kissed me good-bye. Well, something happened to me. I—I guess I like her, too."

Lynne pulled away her hand. "Oh," she said. "I—I didn't know."

He made an impatient movement and lit a cigarette. "I didn't know either. I guess I'm all kind of mixed up."

She stood up. "If you'll excuse me," she said, "I think I'll go home. Call me tomorrow." And before he could get to his feet she hurried out to the street. There was a taxi at the curb and quickly she got into it and gave her address.

Her brother Jack was reading the paper in the cosy living room and Edith was sitting near him mending socks. As Lynne came in they looked up and smiled.

"How was the party?" her brother asked.

"Oh, the usual." She and Jack had been very close in their chilhood, and when she'd come to New York to open her studio he and Edith had insisted she live with them. She'd been with them a year and a half now, and even though she could well afford her own place, they didn't want to let her go.

Edith asked, "Where's Bill? I thought you'd bring him home with you."

Tossing her jacket on a chair Lynne said, "Oh, he—he didn't feel like coming. You'll probably see him tomorrow."

Edith and Jack exchanged glances but Lynne pretended not to see.

"I think I'll turn in," Lynne said. "Big day tomorrow."

WHEN SHE GOT into bed she resolutely closed her eyes but sleep wouldn't come. Round and round went her mind. Bill — Jud — California planes — Santa Claus. Handsome young men who were the center of laughing groups of people who kept squealing, "It's hysterical!" And, "It's priceless!"

She turned and she tossed. And she told herself she didn't care if Bill did like Deborah. She tried to kid herself into believing that it was just a passing fancy on his part.

The next morning she waited for Bill to call. His plane left at five, and he'd doubtless have to leave her an hour or so before that. So they wouldn't have a very long day.

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She was up at eight, was dressed and ready by nine. She played games with Barbara and helped Edith wrap last-minute gifts. Her jewelry orders for Christmas were completed, so she didn't have to go to the studio until next week.

At ten o'clock she wondered if she'd better call Bill.

At eleven she called his hotel. The operator said, "He doesn't answer."

"Oh. Well, did he leave any message saying when he'd be back or where he was going?"

"No, he didn't. But I think he went out about an hour ago."

"Oh."

She prowled around the apartment, first looking out one window and then another. "Who are you looking for, Auntie Lynne?" Barbara inquired. "Santa Claus?"

Without turning from the window Lynne answered, "No. I—I was sort of expecting Bill."

Barbara stood watching her. "Auntie Lynne, do you believe in Santa Claus?"

She turned slowly and looked at the child. "Well—for you, yes. For me—no."

Just then Edith came into the room, and said, "Well, that isn't a very nice way to answer her."

Lynne smiled a bit sadly. "I'm sorry. Yes, Barbara, I guess I believe in Santa Claus."

The child looked at her curiously. "I don't see how you don't believe in him," she said. "You saw him yesterday."

Lynne slowly stroked Barbara's hair. "That's right. I did."

"And he promised to come here tonight with everything I want," Barbara added.

For a moment Lynne had a horrible premonition. *If he dares, I'll wring his neck!* But he wouldn't dare!

A GLASS AND gilt clock on the living room mantel tinkled twelve times, and she decided there wasn't any use waiting for Bill any longer. But she couldn't just mope around the apartment. Maybe she could get Deborah to meet her for lunch. She didn't feel exactly friendly toward Deborah, but in a way she felt sorry for her. It wasn't too much fun to be in love with Bill.

There was a phone extension in her room. Going to it she dialed Deborah's number. The maid answered, "Just a minute, Miss Sheridan," she said.

As she waited for Deborah to come to the phone she could hear a radio voice singing *White Christmas,* and a man's voice that wasn't on the radio say, "Don't tell her I'm here." There was no mistaking that voice. It was Bill's.

Then she heard Deborah's voice, close to the phone, say, "Do you think I'm a complete fool?" Then she spoke into the phone. "Hello, Lynne. What's on your mind?"

Lynne brought self control into play now as she asked, "Doing anything for lunch?"

Deborah hesitated. "Why—yes, and no. Why?"

"I thought maybe we could have lunch together."

"Well . . . I'll tell you," Deborah said. "I'm kind of tired. Could we make it some day after Christmas?"

Lynne counted ten. She was getting a definite brushoff. And there were only a few hours before Bill's plane left. Her heart grew heavier and heavier until it was such a weight she could scarcely bear it. "All right Deborah," she said tonelessly.

She hung up the phone and went to her closet for a coat. She'd put on a Kelly green suit for her day with Bill. Now she chose a matching Kelly greatcoat with a hood. A walk in the Park might help.

But it didn't. She walked and walked until the sun began to hang low over the bare trees. But her thoughts were all wrong. She'd come out to think about Bill

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and instead she kept thinking about Jud Randall. As she kept walking the sun moved on and disappeared. She wondered where Jud lived. He'd spoken of his father, so he must have relatives living in New York.

Later she thought about going home to help Edith with dinner. But somehow she couldn't. She wondered if she'd ever see Jud again. Leaving the park at Fifth-ninth and Fifth she walked down the avenue until she came to a store with a phone booth. She called Edith and asked, "Would you mind terribly if I didn't come home for dinner?"

"Why no," Edith replied. "But where have you been? Bill's been calling here all afternoon."

"Oh. I'm—sorry. What did he say?" She tried to feel excited because Bill had been calling her, but somehow it didn't seem to matter anymore.

"The last time he called he said to tell you good-bye, that he's sending your Christmas gift up by messenger with a note."

"Oh. Well, thanks, Edith. I'll be home in time to help trim the tree." She hung up before Edith could say anything more. Then she continued her walk.

Her thoughts kept going round and round. She wondered if Jud had a girl. That thought led to others. *What kind of a girl would Jud choose? How would he make love to her? Would what he'd say to her be as wonderful as she imagined it would? What would it be like to kiss Jud? He'd said,* ". . . . the moment we looked into each other's eyes this morning . . . we fell in love." *But that was probably just his line.* Every man had a line, and he used it on every girl.

She began to feel hungry, and went into an unobtrusive little restaurant on a side street. She was surprised at the heartiness of her appetite. She'd lost Bill, the man she loved; she really shouldn't be able to eat. But she ate everything.

It was nearly nine-thirty when she finally reached home. As she put her key in the lock she decided she felt much better than before she went out—as if a weight had been lifted from her heart. She felt free.

Standing at the door a moment, she remembered Bill and waited for the weight to descend again. But it didn't. Thinking about Bill just didn't seem to do anything to her now. She felt as if he had never existed at all.

She opened the door. The radio was playing Christmas carols. And there were gay sounding voices. Barbara was still up, talking excitedly. She stepped into the foyer. It was way past Barbara's bedtime. They'd never get the tree trimmed if Edith didn't get the child to bed and asleep.

Pushing the hood of her coat back from her hair, Lynne walked to the door of the living room. Then she stopped. What she saw was enough to stop even her heart. The tree was up, and trimming it was Santa Claus! A very familiar Santa Claus. His suit was different, but there was no mistaking him.

Barbara in a long, swishy black skirt and hugging a small gray ball of fur in her arms was watching him hang a bright, shiny gold ball on the tree.

Then she saw her aunt. She jumped up and down and shouted wildly, "Auntie Lynne! Auntie Lynne! Santa Claus came. He came! Look he's here! And he brought me everything I asked for." Glancing toward the tree, Lynne saw beneath it a big red fire engine and a beautiful big doll which she knew hadn't been put there by the family.

The kitten blinked at her and said, "Meow." Santa turned. "Good evening, Miss Sheridan. Or maybe because it's Christmas Eve you'll let me call you Lynne? We might count it as your little gift to Santa Claus."

She gulped. "Good evening." She man-

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aged to get it out rather disconcertedly because her heart was jumping around like crazy.

Edith and Jack were busy with the tree. Without stopping her work, Edith said, "Isn't it nice of Santa Claus to come and help trim the tree?" he tossed Lynne a warning glance that encompassed Barbara.

Lynne slipped off her coat and dropped it on a chair. "Yes, very nice." But the look she gave Santa Claus wasn't what you might call welcoming, although for some peculiar reason, all of a sudden, she felt like singing Christmas carols.

Santa Claus hung a popcorn ball on the tree. "I had to introduce myself to your folks," he explained. "I thought you'd be here to introduce me. But when you weren't—I just introduced myself."

Barbara jumped up and down and the kitten clung precariously to her shoulder. "Imagine Santa Claus having to introduce himself!" she cried.

"I came in a taxi this year," Santa Claus continued. "Driving a sleigh in the city is a bit difficult."

"Oh, quite," Lynne agreed. She wondered how he'd managed the long black swishy skirt on such short notice.

Barbara grabbed Santa's arm and shook it. "My Auntie Lynne said today she didn't believe in you!"

Santa looked shocked. "She didn't believe in me? Well, perhaps I'd better come oftener than just at Christmastime."

SUDDENLY LYNNE COULDN'T stand the set-up another moment. Going over to the man she said, "Perhaps you'd better get out right now. How dare you barge into my brother's home like this? You're insufferable!"

Barbara dropped the kitten on a chair and came and stood in front of her aunt. Her small face was puckered and there were tears in her big blue eyes. "I think you're mean, Auntie Lynne," she said, a sob quivering in her voice. "Santa Claus brought me everything I asked for. Even the kitten and Mommy had said I wouldn't get a kitten. And now you're sending Santa Claus away!"

The red-clad man looked at Lynne and waited. Edith and Jack stood beside the tree, each holding an ornament. They too waited. Barbara sniffled and stared at her.

After a few minutes Santa Claus asked, "Shall I go?"

Jack cleared his throat. "I'm afraid if you go now it will spoil Barbara's Christmas. And—I'm sure Lynne wouldn't want that to happen."

Lynne admitted defeat. With a shrug she said flatly, "No, of course not." Turning, she picked up a bright shiny green ball and fastened it on the tree.

But she could have strangled Judson Randall for putting her into such an embarrassing position. However, she had to admit that his actions after that were entirely gentlemanly and in strict accordance to the Santa Claus code. He trimmed the tree. He told Barbara about his home up at the North Pole. And—he let Lynne beautifully alone.

Gradually she began to feel more kindly toward him. After a while she was even humming with the radio. A choir was singing, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing,* and she sang with them.

A Carol So Gay

By Harriet A. Bradfield

See the bright star
That once was a dream
Shine on my finger
With wondrous new gleam!

Hear how my love
Spills over in song:
Happy days to you all,
And joy the year long!

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The last light was put on the tree and the switch turned on. As they all stood back and admired their handiwork, Lynne thought suddenly. *Maybe when Barbara goes to bed and Edith and Jack go to church Jud will stay for a while and he and I can get better acquainted.*

But all of a sudden, even before Barbara was sent to bed, Santa Claus announced, "Well, I must be getting along now." He picked up his empty bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Well, Merry Christmas to you all." And before anyone could say, "Thank you," he was gone.

Somewhat astonished, Edith said, "Well now, I was sort of hoping he'd stay a while with you, Lynne, while Jack and I went to church."

Before she could stop herself Lynne said, "Yes, I was hoping so, too."

Barbara looked puzzled. "But how could he?" she asked. "He has so many other places to go!"

"Yes, that's right," Lynne agreed, and wondered just where he *would* go. To some girl?

Edith said, "Come, Barbara. Let me get you to bed before I leave." Then to Lynne, "The package from Bill is on your dresser."

"Oh? Thanks." Hurrying to her room, Lynne tried to feel excited about Bill's package. It was too late to get his to him now. But she supposed she could send it air mail. Somehow it didn't seem to matter.

Bill's package was small and square. It had been wrapped at the store. Opening it she found an expensive gold cigarette case and a note that said:

Dear Lynne:

Forgive me for last night and today. I made a mistake about my feelings. It's you I love. I should have had sense enough to know. I'll be back for you. Keep loving me, and have a nice Christmas.

Your
Bill

She tossed both the case and the letter into her top dresser drawer. Yesterday that letter would have sent her up into seventh heaven; today it merely left her cold. It had come too late.

GOING TO HER closet she took out a black velvet hostess coat and changed her suit for it.

After Edith and Jack had gone she went into the living room and turned on the radio. She sat down beside the still lighted tree. The kitten was climbing over the presents and she picked him up.

Here alone with the tree and the Christmas music she didn't seem to feel as happy as she'd felt before. As a matter of fact she felt very sad and her heart was hurtingly empty. Leaning back in her chair, she let her thoughts wander back to the last couple of hours. Why had she been so unpleasant to Jud? He'd done a kind thing, coming to bring Barbara the presents and playing Santa Claus for her. Whatever his ulterior motives, that one at least was worth a courteous reception.

The kitten crawled up on her shoulder and rubbed his little wet nose against her cheek. "Why did I act that way, kitten?" she asked.

"Meow," the kitten answered, and rubbed its head against her lips.

She kissed it. Then all of a sudden she was crying. "I'm a fool, kitten," she said. "Just a silly fool. I always fall in love with the wrong man. Only—I wasn't really in love with Bill. But oh, kitten, I'm so much in love with—Santa Claus!"

The doorbell rang. She put down the kitten and went to the door. Maybe Santa Claus had returned? Her heart pounded with hope. But when she opened the door it wasn't Santa Claus. But it was a very handsome young man. Judson Randall—playing the role of himself.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Certainly." She stepped aside and let him enter.

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"Have the folks gone?" he asked. "They said they were going to church."

Holding on to the place beneath which her heart was jumping around she said, "Yes. And—Barbara is in bed and asleep."

Jud followed her into the living room and the radio sang, *Hark The Herald Angels Sing* . . . This time it was a woman with a lovely soprano voice, who sang it. The lights on the Christmas tree twinkled and suddenly everything was wonderful and exciting.

Jud had a small, beautifully wrapped package in his hand. "I have a little gift for you," he said, fingering and looking at the package. "But before I give it to you I've got to know something."

"What?" She was trembling with excitement.

He looked up and smiled. "About that—Bill? Has he gone? And—is he coming back?"

She clasped her hand nervously. "He's gone and—I don't want him to come back.

He smiled, rather a shy smile and held out the package to her. "Well, in that case, then I guess it's all right to give you this."

Her hands were shaking so she could scarcely get the ribbon off. As she fumbled with it she asked, "Would you mind telling me how you managed the long black swishy skirt for Barbara?"

He grinned. "I told my mother about it and she made it."

"Oh. Your mother must be nice."

"She is."

The ribbon was off and the pretty paper fluttered to the floor. She lifted the lid of the box. On a field of soft white cotton was a small Santa Claus doll. Pinned to his suit was a tiny card on which was written:

For Lynne

She looked at it for a long time and Jud stood quietly beside her.

When she looked up at him his eyes told her, even before his lips, "I love you, Lynne. Will you marry me?"

She couldn't speak so she just nodded her head and as he took her into his arms he asked. "*Now,* do you believe in Santa Claus?"

She smiled. "How could I help it?"

He kissed her then and she knew that from that moment on she'd *always* believe in Santa Claus.

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BEAUTY SECRETS

By LYNNE SVEC

THE TIME HAS COME—with 1949 just around the bend—for you to turn over a new leaf and be at your beauty-best. It's a time for promises and a firm resolve to keep every one—and for your *own* good, mind you!

How about it? Isn't being beautiful worth being dutiful about a few set routines that make and keep you that way? Actually there's very little you have to do to make a continual big impression. But continuity of beauty ritual is the important thing. So follow these rules, or make a set of your own—but by all means, stick to them:

Resolve . . . to be more healthy. Remember that beauty is lacking when not based on good sound health. When was the last time you had a medical check-up? Do you still see your dentist twice a year? See that you get your quota of sunshine, fresh air, outdoor exercise. All those basics make for sparkle. Strive to get a minimum of seven hours' sleep each night. Don't turn up your nose to beauty naps (if you can spare them); they're not called that for nothing.

Pay some mind to the "inner woman." The beginning of a new year is your chance to take note of, and remedy your diet, if it's faulty. Stress your intake of fruits, vegetables, lean meats, eggs, fish, milk and whole grain products. Think twice before you go on a rampage of sweets, fried foods, rich sauces, pastries, creamed concoctions. Sorry that triple banana split should be a once-in-a-while fling for you, or *else*. (Well, your figure will get out of bounds, and your skin won't be as clear, either!)

Try an occasional facial mask, to clarify your skin. After your skin is clean and dry, apply a light, skin-tightening mask. Smooth it evenly under your throat, over your face. When twenty minutes are up remove the mask with clear water. Then pat your face briskly with skin freshener.

If yours is a problem skin, try this: Mix cleansing grains or meal with water to make a paste for your face and neck. Let set for 15 minutes and wash off with clear water. The mildly abrasive action will remove surface skin impurities, generally purify your complexion. Steam skin occasionally like this: Cleanse face thoroughly. Then apply steaming hot towels, one after the other for about five minutes. Splash with cold water and pat with astringent—or apply ice cubes to skin.

And once a week without fail—defuzz legs and underarms.

Pluck wayward eyebrows.

Clip toenails.

File fingernails, push back cuticle, and apply polish.

Shampoo hair, and rinse six or seven times until it squeaks clean. Perhaps you might need a little vinegar or lemon juice or a special rinse to bring out some "sunlit" luster.

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Never forget your daily bath or shower. Give yourself a tingling towel rub-down. Don't forget the deodorant under your arms.

Use cream or skin lotion—and generously too—for a skin with smoother texture on feet, elbows, upper arms, throat, face and hands.

REMEMBER, YOUR GRACE and the appearance of your figure depend on the perfection of your posture. Try this exercise: Sit on chair, pushing the end of your spine back as far as possible. Dig your spine at waistline into back of chair and hold it there tightly, as you pull your tummy in all the way. Now pull your rib cage high and away from your hips. Stretch the back of your neck up as far above shoulders as possible, while you breathe normally for one minute. Repeat 5 times. You always feel better when you stand erect.

Aim to be better-groomed than you are right this minute. Hair part is straight and clean, right? No makeup clings to hairline. Foundation and powder are applied so no one can tell where makeup leaves off and natural skin coloring begins. Eyebrows are brushed in neat, lustrous line. Lipstick is blotted once—then again, to make for non-smearing surface.

Check and double-check such items as these in the Department of Tremendous Trifles:

A dandruff-free shoulder line.

Really white accessories (collars, cuffs, gloves, etc.).

Shoes that aren't run down at the heels.

Shoes brushed within an inch of their suede lives, or polished to the point where leather is like a mirror.

No peeping slips.

An even hem.

Firmly anchored snaps, buttons.

No grinning plackets.

No splitting seams.

No dangling threads.

And when you use perfume or cologne, it's the merest hint of scent. About you should cling an aura of femininity. If it's too definable, you've used much more than your share.

As to nightly ritual, you always remove makeup, wash face thoroughly, apply night cream for lubrication, brush your hair up and away from scalp and exercise if inches and pounds are where they shouldn't be.

Beauty routines take little time or effort. Just make them a habit and you'll never notice the difference. So long as others *do*. That's why a beauty promise is worth keeping!

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Golden Girl

By MARY MARSH BROWN

Murder was on Lexie's mind and love was in her heart . . .

LEXIE RICE JUMPED when the doorbell rang. The tragedy at the nightclub had made sleep impossible, and she'd been up, walking the floor since dawn in her lounging pajamas, as jittery as a kitten. For an instant she stared at the door, then she thought of Gordon. Maybe he'd heard of the murder and come back! Her heart quickened as she opened the door just wide enough to peek out.

She gasped. It wasn't blond, aristocratic looking Gordon—the one person she loved and needed so desperately. A young man in tweeds stood there—a big, good-looking fellow with light brown hair and gray eyes that smiled reassuringly. It was Byrne Blake from the Los Angeles *Courier,* Lexie finally realized.

"Why, hello!" There was uncertainty in her voice. Byrne frequented the nightclub, but she only knew him casually and by reputation.

Byrne's grin was like a small boy's. "Don't be alarmed, beautiful. I know eight o'clock in the morning isn't exactly a social hour, but I'd like to talk to you."

Lexie brushed back her famous red gold hair that hung to her shoulders. Her blue eyes measured him for a moment, then she opened the door wider. "All right. Come in."

"Thanks!" The newspaper man gazed around in silent approval of her ultra modern apartment, then dropped down in the easy chair Lexie indicated. He looked as if he belonged there, she thought with a shock, then remembered Byrne Blake would never let himself remain that long in any girl's apartment.

"You're lovely, even in the morning, Lexie!" he exclaimed. "And that hair of yours! I'm convinced by now it's natural. No wonder Nic bills you as the Golden Girl—with the theme song, *My Heart's One Love!*"

"What do you want?" Lexie demanded. Byrne wasn't there to flatter her. He was a newsman on the trail of murder. To hide her nervousness, she offered cigarettes from the coffee table, taking one herself.

Byrne struck a match, and their eyes met over the flame in a curiously sharp

Then Bryne did an unforgivable thing. He bent down and kissed her.

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awareness. Byrne's gaze drew away first.

"You're the new feature singer at Nic Brandon's nightclub, Lexie," he said easily. "And you knew Fay Wrenn, the dancer. I suppose you heard what happened to her?"

"Yes, Nic called me. I couldn't believe it when he said Fay had been shot . . . dead!" Lexie shivered. Fay, with her raven hair and black eyes. Charming, vivacious, and selfish, too. She had signed her own death warrant with that selfishness. Lexie was sure of that.

"The cleaning woman found her body in the wardrobe closet about two-thirty this morning. The club was closed and everybody had gone. Fay had been dead about an hour . . ." Byrne's voice trailed away, and, for a moment, his jaw set grimly.

"I didn't see Fay after the last floor show at eleven," Lexie said shortly, as if he'd asked her. "I came right home."

BYRNE STARED AT the smoke curling from his cigarette. "Every now and then, I wander into Nic's for a drink. I happened to catch the first show. You've got a voice to charm granite and you usually put on a swell act. But, last night, you seemed nervous, upset. Any particular reason?"

Lexie stiffened. "No, I just had a headache," she lied.

Byrne's gray eyes fastened on her face. "His name couldn't be Gordon Page, could it? One of the more eligible, blue-blood bachelors around town. You two have been linked romantically, but I guess you're quite aware of that."

Lexie drew a jagged breath, thinking of Gordon. She'd met him almost six months ago, when she sang with an orchestra he'd hired for a party, and, overnight, life had become sheer heaven. Gordon, who could have had any society girl in town, had chosen her, Lexie! Gordon who was everything she'd ever dreamed of!

"Gordon is a friend of mine," she said huskily. Her hand shook as she crushed out her cigarette. She was going to be Mrs. Gordon Page some day soon, but she wasn't telling this nosy man.

"Lieutenant Saunders of the Homicide Bureau isn't convinced it's that casual," Byrne said dryly. "Please don't think me brutal, angel, but I'm going to put it on the line. I get around and hear things. You wouldn't have introduced Gordon to Fay if you'd known she was going to try to snare him. How about it, beautiful?"

Lexie felt stunned. He had guessed the truth. But he had no right to pry, to humiliate her! "That's a horrid thing to say!" she flared. "You leave Gordon out of this!"

"Are you in love with him?" Byrne asked bluntly.

Her eyes blazed. "Really, that's no concern of yours!"

"Maybe not, but the police will make it theirs. Fay was shot and the idea of suicide is definitely out. She couldn't have crawled into the closet to die. Someone wanted her out of the way for a very personal reason."

"Are you suggesting—!" Lexie gasped.

"I'm not suggesting anything. I've heard you sing and I think you're a nice gal, Lexie. Too nice to be mixed up in murder!" He spoke gently, his gray eyes full of understanding, but Lexie was too angry to notice.

"I didn't do it! I couldn't and I wouldn't!"

Byrne nodded. "I want to believe you. By the way, where's Gordon? I couldn't get any answer from his apartment."

Lexie hesitated. But they would find out sooner or later. "He left town yesterday," she said dully. "He was going on a camping trip in the High Sierras." She didn't add she'd been hurt by this sudden trip of Gordon's. He'd wanted to get away from everything for a while,

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he'd told her—and that had meant her, too.

Byrne cocked one brow. "Rather convenient timing. But if he has an iron-tight alibi, he won't have to worry. It's you I'm concerned about, Lexie, and what Saunders may figure out."

SHE DREW HERSELF up then. She didn't want pity, especially from Byrne. He was, first of all, a hardboiled newshawk looking for copy. She had to keep remembering that, even through the queer awareness she felt for him.

"Thanks, but I can take care of myself!" she said sitffly. "I don't want anything from you or anyone else! There's nothing more to say!"

Byrne smiled crookedly. "I'm going to tell you something, Lexie, you probably don't know. You see, beautiful, I knew Fay Wrenn from way back. I helped her get that job in Nic's nightclub. Believe it or not, I even carried a torch for the gal—but it didn't do me much good. Fay had bigger ideas."

Lexie stared at him, knowing a sharp pang. That explained a lot of things about Byrne. He had been hurt and it had left him bitter, afraid of love. Fay hadn't played fairly. But she had been so terribly beautiful, so terribly everything, you couldn't blame Byrne or any man. Even Gordon perhaps.

"Why did you keep coming to the club if that happened between you?" she faltered.

Byrne shrugged. "I don't know really. She was an obsession with me. I think I almost wanted something to happen to her."

Lexie felt chilled. "Did—did you kill her?" she gasped.

"No, but I could have. My friend, Lieut. Saunders asked me that same question when he phoned me what happened. He knew about Fay and me."

Fay and Byrne! Byrne had loved the girl and love made people do strange, terrible things! Lexie stood up to cover her turmoil. "Maybe you'd better go!" she blurted out.

Byrne was on his feet then, facing her. He took her cold hands in his and the touch of him was like an electric shock, taking her breath away.

"I can guess what you're thinking. You're taking a big risk, aren't you, angel? Well, try to have a little faith. I know you didn't kill Fay because—well—you're you. Hold the same thought for me."

She felt an odd stirring of her pulses. "Why?" she breathed.

"Because I'm going to hang around a lot. I knew Fay and I'm covering the case and, well, I like your singing. I almost forget to be the wary, disillusioned bachelor when I hear you make melody."

Then, Byrne did an unforgivable thing. He bent down and kissed her swiftly. "So

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long, baby! I'll be seeing you!" And, before she could get her breath, he was gone.

Lexie stood there, not moving. His kiss lingered, burned her lips in a way Gordon's never had. But it had just been a whim, she reminded herself. Byrne probably kissed a lot of girls that way, carelessly, casually.

Lexie stumbled over to the big mirror that hung above her fireplace. Her reflection stared back at her, too shiny-eyed, too glowing.

"I mustn't see him again," she told herself. "I wouldn't dare!"

And then the phone rang. She was to report to Lieutenant Saunders' office immediately!

IT WAS NOON time when Lexie finally stumbled from Saunders' office. The steely-eyed police investigator had questioned her closely and with obvious suspicion, and she was shaken, benumbed from the ordeal.

Then, unbelievably, Byrne hurried up to her there in the corridor. Lexie gave a little sigh of relief. Somehow, she'd never been so glad to see anyone in her life!

"You look like you need something to eat, baby," Byrne said briskly. "I've been waiting for you."

She didn't ask how he knew she would be there. She tried to tell herself that Byrne really liked her, would do her no harm. She let him take her arm, guide her out to a taxi.

"Don't try to talk," Byrne murmured. "I can guess what happened. Saunders is a swell guy, but he can scare a ghost when he gets going. But remember, angel, he has no proof."

But you could be guilty yourself, she thought, then pushed the idea aside. Byrne took her to an attractive restaurant on Sunset Boulevard, not far from the night-club and her apartment. Over cocktails and lunch, he chatted about everything—politics, the weather, and even told her something about himself. He had just graduated from college when he went into the Army for four years as a Reserve Officer. Journalism had always been his first love and, after his release from service, he'd wrangled a job with the paper. In a couple of months, he was to have a by-line column of his own.

After a while, Lexie was aware that she'd been listening eagerly, quietly for a long time. She was aware too, that she'd been watching his firm, sensitive mouth and the way his smile lighted his face. Surely, Byrne's heart hadn't been so shattered that another girl couldn't patch it up, she thought wistfully.

And then, Lexie remembered Fay and the old torment closed in. It must have shown in her eyes, because Byrne stopped talking and looked at her.

"All right, angel. Let's have it. What did Saunders say?"

Lexie swallowed hard. "He had an anonymous phone call early this morning. Someone reported I'd quarrelled with Fay over Gordon—just before the show last night."

"And did you?" Byrne asked calmly.

Lexie nodded, miserable. "I told Fay to keep away from Gordon. She got mad and told me to mind my own business."

"I figured something like that," Byrne observed.

Lexie stared at him. He had guessed there had been words between Fay and herself! "Then you were the one!" she gasped. "You passed that on to Saunders to save your own neck! How could you!"

Byrne smiled grimly. "Thanks for your confidence in me, angel!"

"Why should I have confidence!" she choked out. "You deliberately looked me up. You were waiting outside Saunders' office—"

"I'm a newspaper man," he said calmly. "I always follow up murder!"

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Lexie's heart twisted with a cheated pang. So he had no real personal interest in her after all! Not that it mattered, of course. She was in love with Gordon and very proud in her love.

"You can do me a favor," she flared, driven by something that overwhelmed her. "You can stay away from the nightclub, because I don't want to see you ever again!"

She would have left him then, but someone had come to their table. It was Nic Brandon. He was a swarthy, handsome man in his late thirties who had made a spectacular success with his nightclub. In the few months Lexie had been working for him, she had learned to respect Nic and even to fear him a little. Nic tolerated foolishness in no one.

"Hello, you two. I saw you over here, Lexie, and came to tell you the nightclub is closed for a while on police orders." His voice was a little thick. He'd been drinking, Lexie realized.

"I'm sorry, Nic, about everything," she faltered.

Nic eyed Byrne then. "Don't tell me the reluctant Romeo has taken his heart out of hock! Or are you just rounding up suspects for your news grinder?"

"Does it matter?" Byrne was smilingly calm.

"Better keep away from this fellow, Golden Girl!" Nic warned Lexie. "He's up to no good, and besides your Gordon Page might not like it!"

"Nic, do you know who killed Fay?" Byrne asked abruptly, before Lexie could draw a breath.

"Sure! Someone who'd learned to love and hate her. Maybe you did, Byrne!"

The reporter's gray eyes were hard. "What's your alibi, Nic?"

"The sandman!" Nic mocked, swaying a little. "I came home right after the show and went to bed. Not that it's any of your business! So long, Lexie." Then he was gone.

Had Nic been in love with Fay too, Lexie wondered vaguely. But she wasn't having any more words with Byrne! Lexie got up and flounced out of the restaurant. She flagged a taxi and got in, but Byrne was right behind her.

"I'm going to see you home!" he said flatly.

"You needn't bother!" she exclaimed, aching with hurt and anger. But Byrne was already there beside her.

Lexie sat rigid, unbending. And then, the music from the taxi radio cut through the fierce numbness that held her. *My Heart's One Love*—it was her theme song! Somehow, it was only mockery now.

Byrne started to hum the tune, then broke off abruptly. "Fay liked the game of hearts too well to settle down with a steady partner," he muttered.

Lexie glanced at him. His face was set and he was staring straight ahead. He

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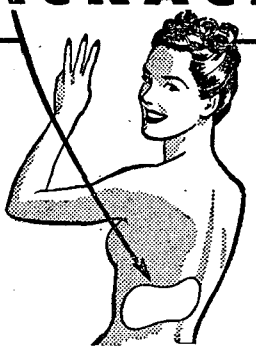

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had never really gotten over Fay. Her throat dried queerly. She wished Gordon were there. Somehow, she needed Gordon desperately.

They reached Lexie's apartment and Byrne, quite uninvited, followed her into the living room.

"What do you want?" she demanded, whirling on him. "We have nothing more to say to each other! Besides, Gordon might come and—"

"I know." Byrne sounded bored. "You love the guy so much that, even when Fay was working her wiles, you trusted *him*! But Gordon's not around. I am!"

Lexie trembled violently. But she wouldn't ask him to sit down. They just stood there, looking at each other in queer, unyielding silence. Then Byrne smiled.

"In spite of everything, I'm glad our lives crossed this way, beautiful."

His gaze was like a caress now and her heart soared oddly. Then she warned herself: *It doesn't mean anything. This is Byrne, remember, the man who loved Fay and who doesn't want any more entanglements. He could have told Saunders about that quarrel too!*

"Yes, I imagine you are glad!" she choked. "You have copy for your paper now. That was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

Byrne's eyes darkened. "Have it your way! You can think what you like, beautiful!"

Lexie was piqued at being dismissed so casually. A perverse something made her want to defy him.

"You don't care, do you? But why should you, when you don't want any girl, really?"

Byrne shrugged. "Does it matter what I want? We haven't been very honest, but after all, this is murder—not romance! Good-bye, beautiful!"

He lifted her chin in his big hand and kissed her. It was a fiercely tender, lingering kiss and, for a lovely moment, Lexie felt like gossamer. Then Byrne was swinging out of the apartment, out of her life forever!

It had been a little heartbeat of time, so mad, so futile that only a fool could make it real! A kiss that meant nothing to Byrne!

LEXIE WAS WANDERING around her apartment, still tingling with anger and awareness, when someone rang the doorbell. She heard Gordon's anxious voice. "Lexie! Lexie!"

She must hurry. She must open the door. She'd been longing for him, hadn't she?

"Gordon, I'm so glad you're back!" she cried, and held out her hands.

Gordon Page was tall and blond and aristocratic looking. He caught Lexie to him and his lips brushed hers. Then he held her away from him and frowned.

"Darling, you look like you've been through a wringer!"

"You heard what happened?" she breathed.

"Yes, I went into Lone Pine this morning for some supplies and saw it in the paper. I started for Los Angeles immediately. On the way, I was picked up by the highway patrol and escorted to the police. Seems I've been a wanted man."

Lexie felt a rush of panic. "Gordon, where were you last night?"

"I spent the night in a mountain lodge and have about fifteen witnesses."

"Thank heaven," she sighed, not that she would suspect Gordon for one minute. Still, it was pleasant to be reassured.

Gordon stared at her. "I'd think about myself if I were you. I've just come from Saunders' office. He thinks you might have killed Fay."

"I know." Listlessly, she dropped down in the easy chair Byrne had taken this morning when he first came to see her.

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Her thoughts drifted. *One day set apart in time. Byrne had come and Byrne had gone!*

"Well, Lexie?" Gordon stood in the middle of the room, a queer expression on his face.

She focused her mind then and her blue eyes widened. "Well? You—you don't think I did it, Gordon!"

"No, of course not. Saunders had me confused, that's all. I'm crazy about you, darling. If I seemed fascinated by Fay, it was one of those silly things. That's the main reason I went away—to get rid of kinks. You're the one I've always wanted, Lexie. The girl I want to marry."

She'd wanted to hear those words, hadn't she? "I knew that, Gordon. But I was afraid of Fay. That's why I warned her not to interfere. I knew she'd only make us both unhappy."

Gordon looked stunned. "Then you did quarrel with her, Lexie! I didn't believe Saunders! It makes a beastly situation for us, darling."

"Us?" she echoed. "What do you mean? Everything's all right now that we're together."

Gordon started pacing the floor, hands thrust in his pockets. "Damn it, Lexie, that's just it! Everything isn't all right. If we get married now, suspicion will only be heightened."

"But I don't care what people think, Gordon. Really, I don't!"

"But there's something else, darling. The Page name is a very old, very prominent one in this city. Any hint of scandal would kill my mother. She's very proud."

Lexie's throat parched. "What are you saying? That you don't want your name linked with a potential murderess?"

"That's a cruel way of putting it, Lexie. You must try to understand the spot I'm in. We'll just have to postpone getting married until this whole mess blows over. I love you. You know that!"

She fought her resentment. Gordon looked so harassed, so unhappy. This was hurting him too.

"All right, Gordon," she said slowly. "We'll preserve the Page honor. After all, I guess I can't blame you too much."

"Darling, I'll do everything possible to help you. We'll get the best attorneys —everything. I'll clear you of this, if it's the last thing I do."

"Thanks, Gordon. That shouldn't be too hard if you're sure I'm innocent." She felt detached, lonely. "Byrne was willing to take a chance," she added almost to herself.

"Byrne?" Gordon asked suspiciously. "Who's he?"

"Just someone," she murmured. "A friend."

Gordon looked annoyed. "Don't forget I'm more than just a friend, Lexie. I think I'll go back to Saunders' office now and see if they don't have a lead."

HE KISSED HER when he left, but Lexie was scarcely aware of his caress. She felt dazed, bewildered, as if nothing were very real. Perhaps nothing was.

Her thoughts went achingly to Byrne and the way he had said goodbye. But she'd wanted it, hadn't she? And Byrne had fallen in easily, even admitting he hadn't been honest. But she mustn't think of him. There was nothing to do but wait —for what, she didn't know.

Later, she didn't know how much, the telephone rang. It was Gordon. His voice came over the wire, excited, rushed.

"Lexie! I've just come from Saunders' office. They've got Fay's murderer! You have nothing to worry about now. It seems that the newspaper man, Byrne Blake—"

Lexie didn't hear any more. The receiver had slipped from her fingers. She sat numb, stricken. Byrne, the murderer! He couldn't be! There was some mistake!

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She didn't stop for her wrap or hat. She just ran from her apartment and flagged a taxi. Riding to Saunders' office, she sat on the edge of the seat, clenching her hands nervously.

"Byrne! Byrne! What have they done to you!" she whispered anguishedly.

Nobody stopped her frenzied rush into the Homicide Bureau. People just stared, amazed, at this girl with disheveled red gold hair and wild, sick eyes.

Saunders was at his desk. There were other men there in the office, but Lexie paid no attention. She stumbled across the room to the police investigator.

"Byrne didn't commit that murder. I tell you he didn't!" she cried desperately. "Someone else did—maybe I did!"

Saunders eyed her gravely. "What makes you so sure Byrne's not guilty?"

"Because he's wonderful!" she moaned. "He couldn't harm anyone!"

The police officer smiled broadly. "I see plenty," he grumbled goodnaturedly. "Byrne! Wipe that dumb look off your face and take over!"

LEXIE CAUGHT HER breath. Somehow, Byrne was there beside her, one arm around her shoulder. He'd been in the room all the time.

"Lexie! You've got it all wrong! Saunders knows I'm not guilty. Come on. Let's go outside."

She stared into gray eyes that smiled reassuringly. Her mouth opened but her throat was dry of words. Blindly, she let Byrne lead her out of the office.

"Lexie, you were terrific, wonderful to do that, thinking . . .!" He broke off, swallowed. "We've got the real murderer all right. After I left you, I checked with Saunders on that anonymous phone call. He said it was a man, and on a hunch, I decided to see Nic again."

"He was tipsy today at lunch," Lexie faltered. She couldn't think straight.

"Yes, and it seemed to me he was trying to drown a guilty conscience. Saunders went with me to Nic's apartment, waited outside the window. Nic was still drinking. I needled him and he lost his temper and pulled a gun on me. Saunders took him in then. The police lab found the bullet from Fay's body matched those in the gun. Nic confessed then."

"But why?" Lexie gasped. "I was under the vague impression he loved her!"

"Sure, and it seems Fay promised to marry him. But she wouldn't stop making up to other men. Gordon Page was the last straw. In a fit of jealous rage, Nic shot Fay. He'd heard you quarreling with her and made you the scapegoat."

This was what Gordon had been trying to tell her.

"Then the case is closed, Byrne," she said weakly.

Byrne didn't look at her. "Yes, and now you and Gordon can be married."

Lexie shook her head. "I'm not marrying Gordon now or ever!"

"What?" Byrne exclaimed, staring.

"I realize now it was just a case of satisfied vanity with me. But the precious Page name doesn't mean enough. It's no substitute for love."

Byrne grinned uncertainly. "That's music to my ears. You tried to save me a while ago, even at the risk of your own pretty neck! Am I worth that much?"

She blinked hard. She couldn't help herself—not any more.

"You're worth everything, Byrne!" she whispered. "More than you'll ever know or care, I guess. I know how you feel about Fay—and everything . . ."

"I stopped loving Fay a long time ago," Byrne told her huskily. "And I do care terribly for you, Lexie. I thought I was such a wise guy, angel. I figured I could help you and not fall in love with you. But I did, in spite of everything! And I'm in love for keeps!"

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By CYNTHIA

DICK HAYMES

YOU JUST HAVE TO LOOK at Dick Haymes' picture these days to know that he's a happy young man. His career is zooming; he's happily married, the father of three beautiful children, and he and his family are deliriously happy on their California ranch. But if you talk to Dick, you can see that he appreciates the things he has. Dick can actually remember going hungry because of his determination to be a top-flight star.

Dick was born in a setting of romance and wealth. His mother was a famous concert singer and his father owned a successful ranch in Argentina, where Dick was born. His childhood was a happy one. He loved the outdoors and he loved horses. He had plenty of both. The family traveled quite a bit, and as they grew older, both Dick and his brother (singer Bob Stanton) inherited their mother's love of music. Dick's ambition was to be a songwriter. He wrote innumerable songs and tried to peddle them to the big name bands by singing them himself. He discovered his voice was a bigger success and found himself singing for such top-flight bands as Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Harry James.

It was about this time that Dick met a beautiful young actress, Joanne Dru, and married her. It looked as if things were just perfect—except for one thing. Dick spurned the idea of staying in what he called "one successful spot" too long. He also felt that he had gone about as far as he could as an orchestra vocalist. He decided to try Hollywood—and that's when the bottom dropped out.

Even though he was a well-known band singer, he couldn't get started alone. There were many days he had to tighten his belt, and many days that he thought he had ruined his career, but Joanne kept telling him to keep at it.

Finally Dick put his career in the hands of agent Bill Burton. Bill landed him a spot at the swank Martinique in New York right across the street from the Decca offices.

One night some Decca people caught his performance and promptly invited him to step across the street and sign an exclusive recording contract. With a brand new baby in the house the contract was manna from heaven. He signed, and his first two records sold over the million mark.

BEFORE THE YEAR WAS OUT, Dick's smoothly flowing romantic baritone was known on every jukebox in the country and he was given the title, "King Of The Jukeboxes." Hollywood beckoned, and this time Dick took the trip with a long term Twentieth Century contract. As he crossed the country, he remembered the last time he had left Hollywood on borrowed money and almost without hope. He wondered if he would make the grade now. As you know, he did. He's had the male lead in some of the country's top musicals, including *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, Diamond Horseshoe* and *State Fair,* one of

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1945's best movies. He will soon be seen in the picture, *One Touch Of Venus.*

Now that his career is set, Dick has found time to enjoy the comfort he had earned. With his lovely wife and three beautiful children, Dick moved to a real Western ranch, and the Haymes are outdoors as often as possible. Although his children are all under seven, he plans to teach them to ride and seven-year old Skipper has already learned the know-how of Western riding. In fact, the whole Haymes family is a happy tribe. Wife Joanne is taking a fling at acting again—and is said to be very good. The kids love the ranch, and Dick is plainly in love with the life he leads. It's the kind of success story with a happy ending that everyone loves, and it proves that Dick not only sang for his supper, but has sung his way to a lifelong meal ticket.

Dick Haymes
Exclusive Decca Artist

JO STAFFORD (Capitol)
By The Way In The Still Of The Night

Looking for a brand new Hit Parade bet? Listen to Jo Stafford's latest, *By The Way.* Jo always does a good job, but with this star-dusted love song, she's sensational. The tune is a hit ballad from the forthcoming film, *When My Baby Smiles At Me,* and believe me, it ranks with the top love songs to come out of Hollywood. Jo sings this dreamy ballad with expressive tenderness, while Paul Weston's subdued, string-sparked orchestra keeps pace with her heart-tugging rendition. *In The Still Of The Night* needs no introduction for it is one of Cole Porter's greatest. It's one of the numbers that helped make Jo famous. Fans love the Stafford rendition and if you don't mind this in an uptempo beat, it's good Stafford singing.

TEX BENEKE (Victor)
Poinciana The Man I Love

The late Glenn Miller had one of the all-time-great aggregations. He set a style in dance bands that is still loved and, in many cases, imitated in some way. Although Glenn is gone, his boys have been carrying on Glenn's famous style to the best of their ability. As you know this old Glenn Miller aggregation is led by Tex Beneke. They haven't quite made the stir that Glenn did in his prime, but every once in a while they come up with something that is really worth singing about. This is it. The rich, expressive blend of brasses and strings vividly recalls the great Miller style with the new Beneke treatment. Tex and his boys handle the provocative *Poinciana* beautifully with a semi-symphonic arrangement, while Garry Stevens and the Moonlight Serenaders add to the romantic treat with their lyrical vocal. *The Man I Love* is the haunting Gershwin classic done as an instrumental. It's expressively played in the best Beneke style.

JOHNNY DESMOND (MGM)
Tara Talara Tala Before Long

One of the handsomest and most talented of this year's heart-throb vocalists is Johnny Desmond, the ex-GI who came to fame as the singing idol of GIs all over the globe. Today he has his own radio and television shows and is now singing on the MGM label. This pair of ballads showcases Johnny's wonderful style. Watch for this first tune, for it's a heart-catcher. If you liked *I Have But One Heart,* you'll like this song. It has the same tender, haunting appeal. Johnny

(Continued on page 98)

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"A girl in a mink coat doesn't have to worry about a present," the stranger said. But how could he know that Fran was looking for something . . .

Just Right for Christmas

By HELEN HIBBARD DAU

JOE, THE ELEVATOR boy, slid the doors shut and started the elevator down. He turned to grin at her cheerfully.

"Looks like it's going to be a real Christmas, Miss Whitmore."

"Yes," said Fran.

"Beginning to snow."

"Yes," said Fran.

"Just right for Christmas," he added.

The elevator stopped and he slid back the door and let her out into the marble lobby. It was conventionally decorated with wreaths and greens.

"Merry Christmas, Miss Whitmore," Joe called after her.

"Thanks, Joe. Merry Christmas to you."

Sam, the elderly doorman, smiled and bowed and lifted his hand to his cap in a small salute.

"I'll call you a cab, Miss Whitmore."

"No, Sam. I'll walk. I—I just have a little errand."

As she turned quickly down Park Avenue, Sam called, "Merry Christmas, Miss Whitmore!"

With a lift of her hand she returned the greeting. It wasn't until she had rounded the corner that she slowed down. The snow was coming down harder and she pulled the small collar of her mink coat tight around her throat.

She was a small girl with a sweet, lovely face. Large blue eyes and a wide mobile mouth. And the snow flakes caught in the smooth short bob of her dark hair.

Suddenly she stopped short and turned her face up to the snow. Just right for Christmas, she thought bitterly.

She wasn't quite sure what had gotten into her. She'd told Alvin she was sick. She couldn't go to the cocktail party or to the midnight buffet supper. Suddenly smart, dressed-up drinking parties had been all wrong for Christmas.

It was the tree that had done it. Henry and Anna had wanted to do something special for her—and they had indeed.

They were her friends, though she supposed most people thought of them as her servants. They'd taken care of her ever since her parents' death two years ago. She had given them this Christmas Eve and tomorrow, Christmas Day, off to spend on Long Island with their daughter

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and grandchildren. But when she had gotten home at five this afternoon they were still there, smiling and anxious as she went into the livingroom.

She had stopped short in the doorway and even had taken a step backward. She hadn't bothered much about Christmas decorations. After all, she wouldn't be home. There were too many parties.

But there in the livingroom was the most fabulously beautiful Christmas tree. An old-fashoned Christmas tree with red and blue and silver bulbs, and garlands of popcorn and tinsel. Paper angels and paper Santa Clauses. There had been holly and even mistletoe over the doors.

"We thought—it should look like Christmas for you," Anna had said nervously.

Fran had managed to choke back the lump in her throat. "It's—too wonderful," she'd said. And she asked Henry to get a bottle of sherry and when they had toasted the tree she had sent them off to Long Island.

SITTING THERE ALONE had made her think of fifteen years before. A shabby, run-down house in New England. Her father forever puttering over some invention in the shed. No money ever. But Christmas had always been wonderful. The tree and the smell of spices from the kitchen and the packages — inexpensive, breathtaking surprises.

Then her father had invented something for an airplane and none of them exactly how it happened, but almost overnight there was more money than they could use, more money than they had dreamed of.

It had been fun and exciting at first. Then her father had had to be in New York and it meant selling the little shabby house—it meant a life cluttered up with important people and *things*.

Fran had learned to hate the money. If it hadn't been for the money her family would never have gone to Florida two years ago—on a plane that crashed. She could remember when an extra ten dollar bill to spend for Christmas would have been a miracle.

She started walking towards Lexington Avenue. *I'm crazy,* she thought. *I could be at the cocktail party with Alvin. Everybody will be celebrating Christmas with champagne cocktails,* with too much noise to hear your own gloomy thoughts.

She wondered vaguely if Alvin would like the gold watch. A very special gift, because she had promised to give him a definite answer tomorrow and the answer was going to be yes. She was sure that he knew it. She was sure that he had the ring for her.

It was seven o'clock and the small shops on Lexington Avenue were still gaudy and bright with Christmas decorations—still begging you to buy their wares. The people hurrying along the street looked tired, but over the tiredness was the shine of anticipation for Christmas. Their arms were full of bundles and they laughed happily at the snow.

Just right for Christmas.

She was walking rapidly and soon found herself beyond the real shopping district. There were still shops. There were lights in the windows. But most of them were closed.

In the light of the street lamp she could see his clean-cut face, and she was angry because he looked amused.

HALF A BLOCK away she saw him. A young man leaning against the darkened plate glass window of an antique shop. No overcoat. The collar of his suit turned up against the damp snow.

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He doesn't want to go home, she thought. *It's Christmas Eve and he's broke. He has nothing to take home with him and he's ashamed.* She remembered again when ten dollars would have been a miracle for Christmas and her heart tugged at the memory.

She didn't stop to think. As she walked along she opened her bag and pulled out a ten dollar bill, and as she passed the young man she thrust it at him.

Suddenly she was aware of keen but amazed gray eyes on her face.

"Merry Christmas," she mumbled and ran toward the corner.

The traffic was thick because of the snow and the light was against her. He caught up with her and took hold of her arm. In the light of the street lamp she could see his clean-cut face, but the look of amusement on it angered her.

"Please," she said. "I don't want you to thank me."

"I wasn't going to. A girl in a mink coat can spare ten dollars. I'm just curious."

"It's nothing," she said quickly. "I just thought you might need it—for your wife and child—or something."

"No wife. No child. Or anything."

The lights changed. Fran jerked her arm away from him and ran across the street.

But he was right with her.

"For Christmas Eve—I'm lonesome, too," he said. "I've got the ten bucks. How about dinner?"

"Please don't bother me," Fran replied. "I have an engagement."

"Not one you want to keep." He grinned at her.

"You're crazy!" she said with exasperation. "How could you possibly know anything about me?"

He laughed at that. "Those big eyes will always give you away. What's against having dinner? Stranger picking you up on the street and all that stuff? We can go some place where there's a crowd and bright lights if you're at all afraid."

"Afraid!" she said, indignantly. She stood there a moment, staring at his smiling face, and suddenly she heard herself saying, "All right. Dinner."

It was the strangest thing she had ever done. He didn't give her time to change her mind. He took hold of her arm and hailed a cab.

In the cab, she found out that his name was Nick Warren and that he was from Texas. She told him that she was Fran Whitmore, and asked him what he was doing so far from Texas.

"Oh," he said vaguely, "I had a prospect of a deal up here."

The cab stopped in front of a large Childs' and he added, "See—I'm a man of my word. Crowds and bright lights."

THEY HAD TO wait for a table and Nick suggested a cocktail at the bar. Even before the cocktails were served a sense of warmth and gaiety began to creep through Fran. She found herself telling Nick about the Christmas tree and Henry and Anna and Alvin, and how she hadn't wanted to go to cocktail parties on Christmas Eve.

She gave a little laugh as she took the first sip of her Martini. "And this isn't a proper Christmas Eve, either," she said.

"It's beginning just right, as far as I'm concerned," he declared. "How about giving it a chance? After dinner we might even go and see that tree of yours and sing some carols together, if you want to be traditional."

Fran started to say there wasn't much tradition about picking up a strange young man and taking him home alone to sing carols with you. But she looked into his face a moment, and suddenly he didn't seem like a stranger. She liked his face better than any she had ever seen, and somehow she felt that she had known Nick Warren all her life.

When they finally got a table it was a

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small one, jammed in by other small tables, so that there wasn't a chance to say very much.

It wasn't until he had paid the bill and they were on their way out that he brought the subject up again.

"How about seeing that Christmas tree now?" he asked. He saw her hesitate and he touched her arm, smiled with understanding, and added quickly, "Never mind, Fran, if you've any doubts about me."

Suddenly she hadn't a doubt about Nick Warren—not a doubt in the world.

"Let's go," she said, and she slipped her hand confidently under his arm.

It was still snowing outside, but Fran suggested that they walk. Almost instantly she realized that it must be dreadfully cold for him without an overcoat, and she said that perhaps a taxi would be better after all. He had to go out into the street to hail a cab and, watching him holding the collar of his coat close around his neck, she felt guilty for having let him spend any of the ten dollars on her. She wondered how she could make it up to him without hurting his pride.

When they got to the apartment she made him wait in the hall until she went in and switched on the lights on the tree. Then she called to him to come in.

He stood in the doorway and gave a little whistle, then said, "Gosh, that's a beauty all right!"

Fran laughed at him. "You must have looked like that on Christmas morning when you were a little boy."

"I was cute. My mother said so." He suddenly saw the piano and moved toward it. "And now for those carols!" he said cheerfully. "I just hope, Miss Whitmore, that your singing is up to my magnificent playing."

He sat down at the piano and began picking out "Holy Night" with one finger. He kept hitting wrong notes and Fran chuckled, but they both sang anyway and ignored the piano. They went through all the old Christmas songs and finally Fran suggested a glass of sherry.

She went out through the dining room and into the pantry, and fixed a silver tray with two glasses of sherry and a plate of Anna's Christmas cakes.

"Here I come," she called as she pushed the pantry door open with her shoulder.

There was no response, and when she got to the living room she stopped short in the doorway and stood there holding the tray, staring around the room. Nick wasn't there. She set the tray down and went into the hall. His hat was gone.

FRAN LEANED AGAINST the wall, feeling a little sick inside. He had just walked out on her without even taking the trouble to say goodbye. *Sneaked* out really. Probably because he had been bored with their little party.

Her face was suddenly warm with humiliation. She'd liked him. She'd believed in him. She'd been having fun. Well, if a girl made a fool of herself picking up a strange man on the street, what could she expect?

But she was angry, too. He might at least have been decent and have made some sort of excuse to leave.

She went back into the living room. She stood there staring at the tree and tears smarted her eyes. She turned away from the tree, hating it. Then she lit a cigarette and walked over to the window. She jerked up the venetian blind. It was still snowing. Just right for Christmas!

There was a sound and she turned so quickly that she had to reach for the back of a chair to brace herself.

Nick stood there, grinning at her and brushing the melted snow from his shoulders. He had a small package under one arm.

"Merry Christmas!" he said gaily. Then suddenly he saw her face and his own became alarmed. "Why, Fran, you're white! Are you sick or something?"

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"I—I thought you'd gone. I—didn't think you were coming back. Oh—*Nick.*"

She could hardly get the words out, but he was smiling now and she had never been so glad to see any one. She knew she would never be so glad to see any one again.

"Why, darling!" said Nick. He strode over to her, dropped the package on the chair, put his hands on her shoulders, and looked into her eyes. "I just went to buy you a Christmas present. It never occurred to me that you'd think I'd disappear."

"I didn't know," Fran murmured.

"Well, now you know," he said gently. He smiled and his hands dropped from her shoulders. Then he picked up the package. "Want to open now or wait until Christmas morning?"

"Now," said Fran, reaching for the package like an eager child.

She tore off the brown paper and inside were three small boxes wrapped in cheap holly paper and tied with red string. She opened them one by one and then she looked at her presents for a moment without saying a word. Six beautifully sharpened pencils, a box of rubber bands, and a box of paper clips.

In all her life she had never had more wonderful presents. She lifted her eyes to his face. The lump in her throat made it hard to get her voice out.

"How did you know?" she asked softly. "These are the things I'm always wanting most and never seem to have on my desk."

"Oh," he said easily. "It's the sort of thing everyone's always out of. And do you know it's getting on to midnight?"

THEY TURNED THE radio on then to hear the Christmas music and they had their sherry and cakes. A little after midnight Nick got up to go.

"Fran," he said, "can I see you tomorrow?"

"Well—I—"

"I know you've got dates. But please, Fran—some day soon I'll have to be making my way back to Texas."

The thought of his going back to Texas somehow gave her a queer, frightened feeling.

She nodded. "Yes, Nick, I'll see you tomorrow."

He was grinning now. He took her arm firmly and led her to the doorway. He put his fingers under her chin and lifted her face.

"Fran," he said huskily, "this is it for me. I knew it the first minute I saw you."

Then he bent his head and kissed her. It was a sweet, warm, tender kiss. And it was over too quickly. He looked at her and smiled at her stunned, speechless face. He pointed up to the mistletoe hanging directly over their heads.

"No complaints," he said, "if you're going to hang that stuff around it's perfectly legitimate."

Before Fran could so much as catch her breath he picked up his hat and went out the door.

She took a quick step towards the door as it slammed. Then she stopped herself and went into the living room. Almost in a daze, she took a cigarette from the box on the table and lit it. She held up the burned matchstick and suddenly realized that she was smiling at it foolishly.

And no wonder! Was she dreaming, or could a kiss really be like that? Could it make you feel so utterly wonderful—with everything so perfect and right?

She was in love. This was it. Those were the words Nick had used. She must get to bed and be fresh for tomorrow. As she switched off the living room lights she blew a kiss towards the tree. Just right for Christmas, she thought happily.

It wasn't until she was half-way undressed that she came to her senses. She had picked up a strange man on the street, had been with him for just a few hours,

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and now she was imagining herself in love with him. He was obviously down and out and she had given him ten dollars. She had actually paid for her own dinner and her own Christmas presents. And just because he had kissed her in a way she had never been kissed before she had believed in him.

It must have been very obvious to Nick Warren that she had money. And it was probably the same thing over again. The thing she had been fighting ever since she had reached marriageable age. Men pretending to be in love with her because they wanted her money.

It was why she had decided at last to marry Alvin. Alvin loved her and she supposed she loved Alvin. He was nice. He was handsome. But most important, he was the only man who had been sincere about her money. He said, quite frankly, "Fran, I can use the money in my business. Why should I pretend otherwise? Of course I love you. Who wouldn't? But how could I honestly say I'd be in love with you if you were poor. You'd be a different girl."

Her mind was suddenly going around in circles. It made sense to marry Alvin, whom she had known so long. But she felt in *love* with Nick Warren.

SHE FELL ASLEEP in this state of confusion. She didn't sleep long. It was seven when she opened her eyes. Her first thought was that it was Christmas Day and Nick was coming.

She was out of bed in a hurry, which was foolish because of course he wouldn't be there so early. She remembered, too, that she must call Alvin and tell him that she couldn't go to the Staffords' dinner party. But it was too early to call Alvin. He'd be sleeping late, after last evening's parties.

She took her shower and put on a new black wool housecoat trimmed with gold. She went down to the kitchen and made herself coffee and a piece of rasin toast.

Henry and Anna had put all her packages under the tree, and when she finished the toast and coffee she felt restless, so she sat down and opened the packages.

There was one perfume bottle after another. She already had a dozen on her dressing table. There were only two things she cared anything about—a lovely pink sweater Anna had knitted for her and two hand-embroidered handkerchiefs from an old friend of her mother's in New England.

She got up from the floor. Her pencils and paper clips and rubber bands were on the piano. Impulsively she reached down and touched them. Would Nick come?

Her phone's sudden ring startled her. She glanced at the clock and discovered that it was already after nine. She ran to the phone, her heart pounding. But it wasn't Nick. It was Alvin.

"I hope you're feeling better today, darling," he said. "You missed something. The Holdens' party was a riot. They had the craziest gag presents for everybody. I'll tell you all about it. I missed you. What time shall I pick you up?"

"Alvin," she said, "I'm really still feeling terrible."

He didn't answer for a moment and she sat there feeling miserably ashamed of her lie.

"But, darling, what's the matter?" Alvin demanded anxiously. "The Staffords are expecting us at five. I'd better get you a doctor."

"Oh, no, Alvin—please. I'm really better. I just ate something that didn't agree with me. And I'm just shaky today. I just don't feel up to people and a big dinner." She hoped she didn't sound panicky as she felt.

There was a brief silence from Alvin and then he said in a hurt tone of voice, "Fran, you know what day it is?"

"Oh, dear, I forgot to say Merry Christmas," said Fran.

"That's not what I mean. This just hap-

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pens to be the day that you promised to tell me—"

"I know, Alvin, I know, but I'll just have to put it off till tomorrow. You must forgive me."

There was another pause from Alvin and then a stiff, "Very well, Fran. You know, you're letting us all down for Christmas. You don't sound like yourself. If you're really sick you should have a doctor."

"No, Alvin, *really*. I'm just shaky. I'll call you at the office in the morning. I'll wire Eve Stafford some flowers with my apologies—and you can explain. Goodbye now—I must get back to bed."

She hung up the phone quickly. She certainly hadn't lied when she'd said she was shaky. And she sat there feeling so guilty that it would seem all she deserved was that famous bolt of lightning to come out of the sky and strike her dead.

THE DOOR BELL was suddenly ringing as if the lightning had hit it. Rushing to answer, Fran almost tripped over the long skirt of her housecoat. It was Nick, all right. Fran's heart leaped and her face was glowing. Then she gasped with surprise.

Nick was grinning and from behind him he pulled two dirty little boys. Each was clutching in his hand a shoe-shine box and they looked a little bewildered and suspicious.

"I brought 'em to see the tree," said Nick gaily, "after breakfast—if you've got any."

Fran grinned back at them. "Sure we've got breakfast." She opened the door wide. Nick pushed the two kids in ahead of him. They went to the living room door and stood there. Nick leaned over and kissed Fran on the tip of her nose.

"Just as beautiful for breakfast as for dinner," he said. He straightened and laughed. "I forgot to introduce Jerry and Mike. Boys, this is Miss Whitmore."

Mike said, "It's nice, all right. But it's not as big as the one in Rockefeller Center."

Fran and Nick cast glances of amusement at each other. Then Fran said, "Well, come out into the kitchen. Bet they haven't an ice box in Rockefeller Center."

It wasn't eggs, bacon, or cereal that the boys wanted for breakfast. They spied the whole cooked turkey that Anna had left for Fran. And the cranberry and stuffed celery.

Nick and Fran decided to join in the feast. The food seemed to ease the boys' suspicions. It was spread out on the kitchen table and the four of them were having an hilarious time, when the door bell's ring startled them.

Fran jumped a little. "What's that?" she said.

"Oh, one of those Christmas telegrams," Nick reassured her. "I'll get it."

In a couple of minutes he was back. His eyebrows were lifted with amusement. He pointed a thumb back over his shoulder. "There's a gentleman to see you, Fran. He seems to be mad about something."

If Fran's face wasn't white it certainly felt white, as she stared into Alvin's angry face.

"I can see that you're very sick in bed," said Alvin.

Fran stared down at the piece of cold turkey she had in her fingers. She had a wild desire to giggle. She suddenly popped the turkey into her mouth and began to chew. At least, while chewing she couldn't speak and it would give her time to think.

I've gone crazy—or something, she thought. *I'm having fun.*

Jerry wasn't bothered by having his mouth full. "We gotta go," he mumbled almost inaudibly.

Fran swallowed. "Oh, no, boys," she said. "Eat your turkey."

"We've had enough," said Mike. "We gotta save room for later. Mom's got one at home."

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With a hurried "thanks" the boys scrambled off.

NICK PUT HIS foot on a kitchen chair, lit a cigarette, and leaned on his knee. "And there I thought were two little underprivileged children," he said, with mock mournfulness.

Alvin was standing there like a ramrod. He fixed a cold stare on Nick. "And who are *you?*" he demanded.

Nick bowed a little. "Folks back home call me Nicholas Warren."

Alvin turned to Fran. "Don't you think this calls for an explanation?"

"Well, I don't know," said Fran slowly. "Why?"

"After all," said Alvin indignantly, "we're engaged."

"Not yet," said Fran. "You're taking a lot for granted."

Nick shrugged his shoulders a little. "Me, too," he said. He flicked some ashes carelessly into an empty dish on the table. "I've been taking it for granted that Fran was going to be engaged to me."

For just a moment Alvin's eyes looked over Nick's suit. The snow the night before hadn't left it in an exactly well-tailored condition.

Alvin turned to Fran. "I still think you owe me an explanation. Who is this man? He looks like a cheap money hunter to me."

Suddenly something snapped in Fran. She was angry. It wasn't fun any more. She hated them both.

"As if I didn't know!" Her hands were clenched. Her eyes flashed. "Get out of here! Both of you! Just how stupid do you think a girl can be! You're so self-righteous, Alvin! So smug! And as for *you—*" She flung herself around toward Nick. "Don't you think I don't know what you're up to! Now get out of here, both of you! Or I'll call the police!"

Nick took his foot off the chair and straightened. He shrugged his shoulders carelessly in the gesture of a gambler who had taken his chance and lost and didn't care too much. "Guess we're both licked," he said to Alvin. "Guess we'd better beat it."

"You'd better! Both of you!" said Fran, furiously.

Nick gave her a little salute. "I will," he said. "And I'll also take this other gentleman with me." He took Alvin's arm. Alvin sputtered for a second, jerked his arm away, and stalked out of the apartment with Nick after him.

It wasn't until they had gone that Fran, standing there trembling with rage, suddenly collapsed. She sat down on a kitchen chair. The tears came slowly at first. And then she was sobbing.

It was true she hated them both. Alvin would be back tomorrow, offering to forgive her. She'd never take him back. Never—never! But Nick wouldn't be back. He didn't even care. He'd been playing a game and he'd lost. And that was the kind of man he was. Gay, carefree, fun to be with. But only out for what he could get. He could kiss a girl. He could make her dream. But only as long as there was something in it for himself.

Fran stopped crying and went into the other room for a cigarette. Before she lit it she stood staring for a moment at the Christmas tree.

Just right for Christmas.

It would be some satisfaction to tear that tree limb for limb, then she thought of poor Henry and Anna's faces if they should see it.

THE DOOR BELL rang. She stiffened. Oh, no! She wasn't answering any door bells. Nor the telephone, either. She took a puff from her cigarette and walked over towards the piano and looked at the pencils and paper clips and rubber bands. She suddenly lifted her hand and swept them to the floor and stood there, looking down at the mess they made.

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Then, she was crying again. She couldn't help it. She loved Nick Warren and he had walked right out of her life as if she were nothing. It was only her money he had cared about.

The door bell rang again. And then the phone started. Fran ran to her room, slammed the door, flung herself on the bed with the pillow pressed against her ears.

It was hours later when she opened her eyes. She had finally cried herself to sleep. She was suddenly conscious of someone gently shaking her. "Miss Frances, Miss Frances," cried Anna's frightened voice. "Has something happened? Are you all right?"

Fran sat up. The blinds were still up, but the windows were dark. Anna was wearing her coat and hat. She and Henry must have just come home.

"I'm all right, Anna," said Fran.

"I was so scared," breathed Anna with a sigh of relief. "And Henry says there's a young man sitting at the front door. Just sitting there!" she exclaimed excitedly. "And Henry doesn't think he's drunk. But he's watching him, because the young man says he won't go away till you see him."

"No, I won't," said a voice from the doorway. Nick stood there and behind him Henry was making futile gestures to hold him back.

Fran opened her mouth to say something. Then she snapped it shut and stared.

Nick Warren stood there looking like a perfect picture out of *Esquire*. She had never seen such a neatly, beautifully tailored man.

Nick said, calmly, "You really ought to powder your nose before I propose."

"What are you doing here?" Fran managed to ask somewhat futilely.

"I just gave you a big hint," said Nick. "Why don't you answer your door bell or phone ever?"

"You'd better wait in the living room," said Fran, a little weakly. Her heart was

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pounding and it took her half a minute to powder her nose.

"I suppose," she said, coldly, "that you want me to bail you out in case you're caught for stealing those clothes!"

Nick laughed at her and without even hesitating he put his arms around her.

She tried to push him away from her, but he held her firmly. "Now you just listen," he ordered. "I know just how you feel because I've felt the same way for years. That everyone was trying to marry me for my money—"

"But—"

"I know. But it just so happens that I'd stopped in a bar last night for a little Christmas cheer and someone picked up my overcoat. I'd walked a bit, looking for a cab to take me back to my hotel, and finally decided that I might just as well stand in that doorway and wait for one when you came along and handed me that ten dollars. I knew you thought I was broke and the situation caught my fancy.

"It caught more than my fancy," he went on. "It caught my heart. And when I kissed you I knew that at last I'd found a girl who loved me without knowing I had a cent. You do love me, darling!"

"Oh, Nick," Fran whispered. "Is it true—really true?"

"It's true, darling," he said. "It's really true. It's true that I own one of the biggest ranches in Texas. I have to go back on Tuesday. Now darling, I want *you* to say that you'll go back with me."

"Oh, Nick," she said, her eyes shining. "I'm so happy I—I can't say anything."

"There's a better way to say it," he said huskily. And suddenly his arms tightened around her and this time when he kissed her it wasn't a light kiss under the mistletoe. It was a kiss that belonged to two people who would love forever.

It was just right for Christmas!

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BERMAN'S COLLATERAL LOAN BANK, DEPT PF

636-38 W. Baltimore St. Baltimore 1, Md.

(Continued from page 55)

why didn't you tell anybody where you were going after you gave away *The Star?*"

"It was nobody's business."

"How much do you want for this sheet of yours?"

"What am I offered? I take it that you've checked up on circulation and advertising."

He rounded the end of her desk. "Your investment, plus say, ten or fifteen percent?"

She shook her red head. She found herself on her feet. Just waiting, heart hammering. The more fool she. "Bid higher, Pete."

"How about a half interest. For cash. A partnership?"

"Interesting. By the way, how is Nedra Forsythe?"

"That predatory female? How should I know?"

"I thought that—you liked her."

"While trying to forget a redhead, yes. Of no importance otherwise. Red, I meant it when I said that I'd dreamed of a girl—!"

He stood looking down at her. "Red, do I know why you gave away your big city paper, why you bought what I once told you I wanted?"

"Could be." She could barely breathe.

"How long have you advertised?"

"A couple of eternities."

"How did you guess that I was trying to find you?"

"I didn't. I worded my ads so you wouldn't know who wrote them."

"Red, how much for a half interest?"

"You're doing the bidding." Her heart pounded.

"Well," he took her slim shoulders into the grip of his strong hands, "Frenchy tipped me off to something. How about heaven with a fence around it?"

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YOUR PEN PERSONALITY

(Continued from page 57)

tion over which you hear them, and give them a resumé of both your backgrounds. Tell them when you expect to marry. Remember, hundreds of others are doing the same thing so don't expect a reply within a couple of weeks. You may have to wait months. Be as complete in your first letter as you possibly can. If there is anything interesting associated with your courtship, include that in the application you send in.

Dear Mary Frances:
It's the old, old story. We are poor, young, healthy. My boy friend thinks we should wait until we have some money. I think we should enjoy our youth together, save together, and be happy as we go along. We're miserable now. What should we do?
Lillian R.

If you're in love, marry. Both of your signatures show a rather matured type so you probably know what you are doing. It is the "immature youth" who should wait. There is no set rule for this as personal circumstances may alter cases, but you seem to know what you are doing. So go to it, and good luck.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

M. E. I should think it would be difficult to study voice culture by mail. Before investing $100 ask a nearby voice critic for an opinion. Naturally there will be a small fee for the time you take up, but it may save you $95. Voice doesn't show up in anyone's handwriting, as that is a physical characteristic.

L. O. Your handwriting is much too small to be legible. For library work it would be necessary for you to enlarge it, probably adopt a backhand semi-printed style.

H. A. W. Your true vocation is that of architect, so I hope you follow the courses given in your college. Get your adviser to help you in planning your schedule.

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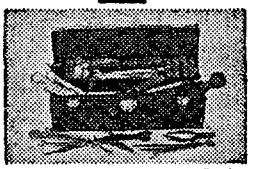
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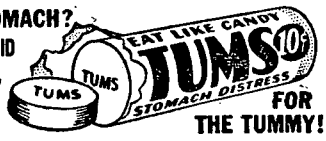

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INTERNATIONAL LABORATORIES, ROCHESTER 11, N. Y.

NEW LOVE MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 84)

sings the second chorus in Italian and the accompanient of the celeste makes it very effective. *Before Long* is a melodious tune with an indigo quality achieved by the piano and rhythm background.

DORIS DAY (Columbia)
Pretty Baby Just Imagine

Vivacious Doris Day gives out with two melodic standards. Doris softly chants the lyrics of *Pretty Baby* backed by George Siravo's rhythm combo. She sings *Just Imagine* at a slower pace and renders an appealing bit of balladeering.

SAMMY KAYE (Victor)
Here I'll Stay Green Up Time

A short time ago, a new show opened on Broadway and is now a smash hit. It's the musical, *Love Life,* and the music is from the magic pen of Kurt Weill. One of the first bands out with the show's two top tunes is Sammy Kaye, and I think you're going to want this record. *Here I'll Stay* is a smooth ballad that catches your heart strings the moment you hear it. Don Cornell sings this in his best romantic style. The reverse is a pert and perky tune with a toe-teasing rhythm and delightful melody. It's my guess you'll find these on all the major record labels.

ALBUMS BETS

Song and Dance Man (MGM) Advance reports on this Gene Kelly album say that it is nothing short of terrific, and that's just how I felt when I heard it. Gene impersonates some of the immortal names in show business, like minstrel men George Primrose and Eddie Leonard, and all the other great song-and-dance men who handed down their great tradition and helped make show business the great thing it is. You're in for a sparkling half hour treat when you hear Gene dance and sing in the styles of George M. Cohan, Bill Robinson and Fred Astaire.

Harvest Moon Album (Capitol) Here's an album filled with sweet melodies sung by the harmonious Pied Pipers and played by Paul Weston and his Orchestra. You'll hear such standard greats as *Melancholy Baby, Shine on Harvest Moon* and many others. It's a swell album bet.

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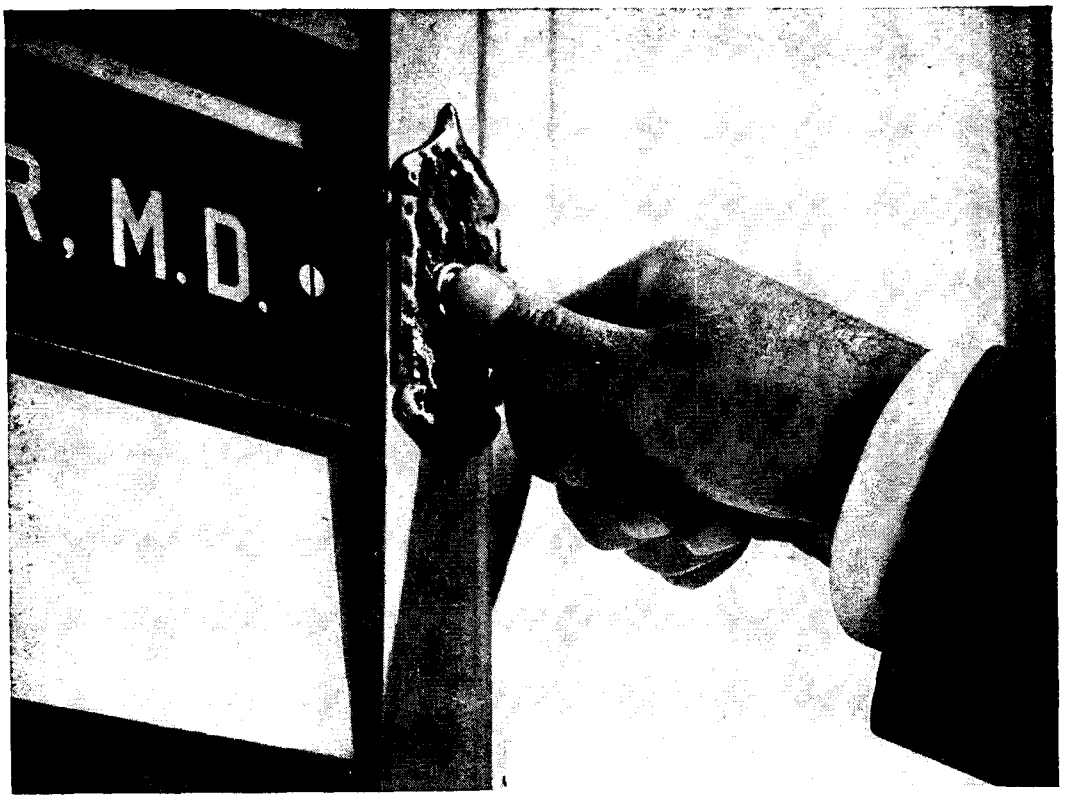


YOUR FIRST MOVE AT THE FIRST SIGN OF CANCER

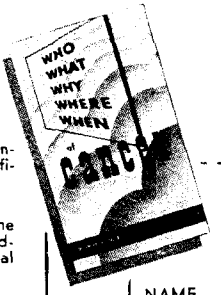
THE way to win against cancer is to discover it early—don't be afraid to learn the truth. Your doctor may give you the good news your fears are groundless. Or that a relatively simple course of treatment, in the light of new medical discoveries, is producing wonderful results in similar cases. But whatever you're told, the sooner you act, the better the news will be.

Always be on the lookout for cancer's danger signals. Watch for them in yourself, in your friends and in members of your family.

Remember—you can't *diagnose* cancer yourself, but you can *suspect* it. Be on the lookout. Check up on yourself from time to time.

CANCER'S DANGER SIGNALS

1. Any sore that does not heal, particularly about the tongue, mouth or lips.
2. A painless lump or thickening, especially in the breast, lip or tongue.
3. Progressive change in the color or size of a wart, mole or birthmark.
4. Persistent indigestion.
5. Persistent hoarseness, unexplained cough, or difficulty in swallowing.
6. Bloody discharge from the nipple or irregular bleeding from any of the natural body openings.
7. Any change in the normal bowel habits.



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AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY
47 Beaver St., New York 4, N. Y.

Please send me free the booklet containing vital information about cancer.

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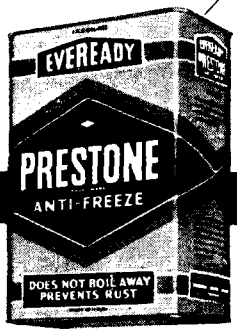
SAFETY'S A MUST with Ambulance Driver David Landew, of Muhlenberg Hospital, Plainfield, N. J., who says, "I put one shot of 'Prestone' anti-freeze in my radiator every fall and I'm safe from freeze-ups!"

SAFETY'S A MUST with Police Captain Emerson Payne, of Jeffersonville, Indiana. "No matter how quickly the weather changes, 'Prestone' anti-freeze keeps my car free from freeze-ups."



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